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# Archiving the Present in Beirut's Southern Suburb: Memory, History, and Power at Umam Documentation and Research

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# Archiving the Present in Beirut's Southern Suburb: Memory, History, and Power at Umam Documentation and Research

**by**

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# Dedication

To my parents, as a small token of gratitude for a life of love and support.

# Abstract

## Archiving the Present in Beirut's Southern Suburb: Memory, History, and Power at Umam Documentation and Research

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Umam Documentation and Research, a private archive and non-governmental organization located in the Beirut's southern suburb, states as its goal to "initiate collective reflection on the many different types of violence that plagued Lebanon's past, weighs heavily on its present, and has [sic] the potential to influence its future as well." This thesis seeks to interrogate the spaces and narratives that influence Umam D&R's work as well as to analyze the forms and concepts in contemporary Lebanon that inform it. It begins with a description of the historic home, Villa Slim, in which the organization's office and a large part of the archive are housed. From there, it shifts to focus on The Hangar and its relationship to the broader arts and culture milieu that emerged in Beirut following the Lebanese civil war (1975-91). Finally, it addresses questions of intention and authenticity in the production of history through a comparison between Umam D&R's work and the art of Lebanese artist Walid Raad, which also focuses on constructing and archiving memories of Lebanese conflicts. Through these

three spheres of Umam D&R's work, I will explore the underlying currents of their project – to intervene in the dominant historical narrative through conceptual efforts grounded in the discourse of documents and facts. Just as specific spaces shape Umam D&R's work, certain notions of "truth" and "history" effect the way they construct the past through their multifaceted projects, which engage the present by projecting images onto the future, attempting to spark possibilities.

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# INTRODUCTION: ARCHIVING THE PRESENT

"Ah memories; it's not just a building." (Salma Slim, "Collecting Dahiyeh" exhibition)

## "Nations" and the Archive

In May 2015, a large truck with metal railing running up its sides has just reversed through the tall gate in the wall that separates Villa Slim's grounds from the surrounding area. The bed of the rust-colored truck is full of plastic garbage bags stacked haphazardly on top of each other, their contents protruding out at awkward angles. The color of the bags – cobalt blue, black, and sheer white – compliment the red tones of the truck, which stands out against the overwhelming green vines that frame the scene. It appears to be a particularly idyllic image of urban garbage collection.

It is not trash in the bags, however, but Umam Documentation and Research's newest acquisition: hundreds of Lebanese and Syrian newspapers, some dating back to the 1950s. Umam D&R, a private archive and non-governmental organization originally posted the series of pictures chronicling the arrival of its new collection –transported all the way from neighboring Syria – on its Facebook page. Other images show staff climbing the sides of the truck to unload the bags and then freeing the newspapers from their plastic confines on an open porch. The periodicals ultimately ended up stacked neatly along a table in a back room of the house, which is where I saw them a month or so later, with a thin layer of the archive's ubiquitous dust already coating the top editions.

While some staff initially reviewed the collection, the organization has yet to publish the "itemized list" of contents promised by the text accompanying the photos on Facebook.[1] They join a large collection of documents and periodicals stored in the big house, awaiting someone to tell their story.

[1] Umam Documentation and Research, "New Acquisition," https://www.facebook.com/umam.dr/photos/?tab=album&album_id=839273679442331.

Figure 1 New acquisition.[2]

[2] Ibid.

Umam D&R was established in 2004 by filmmaker Monika Borgmann and publisher-turned-activist Lokman Slim, and it received official recognition as an NGO by the Lebanese Interior Ministry in 2005. Prior to this, the two had been working together to produce a film with several others as part of "Umam Productions." "Umam," which translates to "nations" in Arabic, predates collaboration between the pair, who also married while working on the film, and was possibly a reference to the multinational makeup of the original group (Monika is German, Lokman Lebanese, and others involved are American, French, and German). The name, however, has evolved to denote the multiple narratives of the past that the organization seeks to highlight in its engagement with the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991) and other instances of civil violence. It was after the film was complete that it changed from "Umam Productions" to "Umam Documentation and Research," denoting the shift in the couple's focus to cataloguing and challenging conventional wisdom of Lebanon's past.

Broadly, the organization attempts to "initiate collective reflection on the many different types of violence that plagued Lebanon's past, weighs heavily on its present, and has [sic] the potential to influence its future as well."[3] In practical terms, over its decade of existence Umam D&R has sought to foster engagement with the past through its growing "citizen's archive," which in turn has provided material for exhibitions, film screenings, and discussions hosted next door in a gallery space called "The Hangar." Complicating questions of authorship and intention, though Umam D&R has not

[3] "About Us," http://www.umam-dr.org/aboutUs.php?location=aboutUs.

exclusively produced all the events featured in its spaces, the organization generally hopes to foster reconciliation and understanding through research, art, and debate.

In this thesis, I seek to interrogate the spaces and narratives that influence Umam D&R's work as well as to analyze the forms and concepts in contemporary Lebanon that inform it. It begins with a description of the historic home, Villa Slim, in which the organization's office and a large part of the archive are housed. From there, I will focus on The Hangar and its relationship to the broader arts and culture milieu that emerged in Beirut following the Lebanese civil war (1975-91). Finally, I will address questions of intention and authenticity in the production of history through a comparison between Umam D&R's work and the art of Lebanese artist Walid Raad, which also focuses on constructing and archiving memories of Lebanese conflicts. Through these three spheres of Umam D&R's work, I will explore the underlying currents of their project – to intervene in the dominant historical narrative through conceptual efforts grounded in the discourse of documents and facts. Just as specific spaces shape Umam D&R's work, certain notions of "truth" and "history" effect the way they construct the past through their multifaceted projects, which engage the present by projecting images onto the future, attempting to spark possibilities.

## Organizing Umam D&R

My understanding of the history that Umam D&R works to construct was most informed by those I interacted with at the organization. The two interlocutors that shaped this work most significantly were co-founders and co-directors Lokman Slim and Monika Borgmann. Lokman is the fundamentally central figure among Umam D&R's staff due to his pre-established relationship to the neighborhood surrounding the archive, which is in turn housed there because of his family. The initial collection that made up Umam D&R's archive was drawn from his family's extensive library of documents, periodicals, and other publications, and since its inception, his family's estate, Villa Slim, has served as home base to the organization. Lokman is the son of former Member of Parliament, Mohsen Slim, and part of a well-established Shi'a family from the neighborhood of Haret Hreik in southern Beirut. He returned to Lebanon at the end of the civil war (from 1982 to 1988 he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris) and founded a small publishing house with his sister Rasha al Ameer called Dar al Jadeed, which Rasha maintains to this day. From there, Lokman shifted his direction increasingly toward cultural activism, eventually becoming involved with Monika, first professionally and then romantically, and founding Umam D&R. Since then, he has gone on to found a second NGO, "Hayya Bina" ("Let's Go" in formal Arabic), which focuses on more political "civil society building" efforts in majority-Shi'a areas of Lebanon. He positions himself as an independent thinker still deeply embedded in the Shi'a experience in Lebanon (which will be addressed more completely in the following sections), but offering a different and

oppossing approach to that of the dominant Shi'a political party Hezbollah, which has historically received support for its military wing and its political agenda from Iran and Syria.

As an activist, Lokman adopts projects himself as an academic and adopts a striking verbosity when he talks and writes about Umam D&R's projects. Wary of definite statements, he often circles around his argument, occasionally making reference to philosophers or facts and documents to support a liberal worldview informed by years of French education that culminated in a Master's degree in philosophy. He is also capable of shifting his approach depending on his audience, becoming more conceptual in some contexts and more political in others. But, as is also the case in conventional academia, his intellectualism by no means negates a distinctive political position; an avowed critic of Hezbollah, Lokman bases his opinions on his support for secularism, freedom, and equal rights for all. As such, the liberal work he carries out through both Umam D&R and Hayya Bina seeks to directly and indirectly challenge the dominance of Hezbollah in south Beirut.

His co-founder and co-director Monika is often less idealistic and more straightforward in her approach. Initially living in Paris and Algiers before moving to Lebanon in the 1990s to work as a freelance journalist, she became increasingly involved with documentary filmmaking in the country before eventually collaborating with Lokman to establish Umam D&R. While both she and Lokman act as public representatives of the organization, they also often take on distinctive tasks. The pair,

who were married in 2006, live on the Villa Slim grounds, but Monika manages the NGO's records, while Lokman splits his time between the Umam D&R offices and those of Hayya Bina. Additionally, Monika has been more extensively involved with the artistic events and exhibitions held at The Hangar, a role that has also translated to her continued work with media such as film and theater. She has also been more directly involved in Umam D&R's efforts to extend its influence beyond Lebanon, participating in conferences across the region and taking a theater troupe comprised of former Lebanese and Syrian detainees to Europe to share their experience. While drawing a clear line between the tasks the two carry out within the organization would be difficult, their unique backgrounds – Lokman a bourgeois Shi'a intellectual and Monika a European journalist and filmmaker who, despite offer a decade living full-time in Lebanon, retains an outsider perspective – lead them to address questions of Umam D&R's role in slightly different ways that effect their work.

Aside from Lokman and Monika, many others have shaped and continue to shape the cultural interventions carried out by Umam D&R. For the purpose of this study, which is based partially on interviews conducted in summer 2015, those who worked or work with the organization in a less public capacity are given pseudonyms. While I was not able to speak with everyone who has worked at Umam D&R over the course of its history – there are several key employees that no longer work there as a well as countless interns and translation staff that have come and gone over the years – I will also use pseudonyms for those involved with the organization that I did not meet. Because of their

respective roles in the public sphere, I have retained the names of Lokman, Monika, and Rasha (Lokman's sister who also runs and represents Dar al Jadeed), as well as several other public figures involved in the arts and culture scene in Lebanon. As the people that have been there since the beginning, more than any other source Lokman and Monika facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the organization's development over time, albeit influenced by the particular time and space of 2015 Lebanon.

The way that Umam D&R functions as an organization and archive is constantly in flux, dependent on a number of factors. Generally, the NGO relies on support from donors and sponsors, such as the Danish Embassy in Lebanon, to sustain the organization, while several large grants over the course of its history have enabled it to expand its mission, such as that from the Prince Claus Fund of the Dutch Foreign Ministry, which enabled them to begin digitizing their archive collections. Some of their initiatives have thus been undertaken as a direct result of the support the organization received, but almost all of its original projects were first conceptualized by Umam D&R staff (occasionally in collaboration with others such as the International Center for Transitional Justice, with whom Umam D&R worked on several long-term projects). As is emphasized by the organization in its literature and by those that work there, exhibitions, films, discussions, and lectures were most often inspired by some document(s) or emerging narratives of the past recently made public through oral interviews. In this way, Umam D&R sees itself as representing citizen interests and responding to public questions of history and memory through its archive and events.

The question of backing, however, remains a significant one. As will be discussed more comprehensively in Chapter Two, Umam D&R seeks to benefit from a landscape of funding opportunities resulting from the neo-liberal influx of capital into Lebanon following the end of the civil war. Instead of receiving private capital, though, they compete with other arts organizations to receive money from international governmental and non-governmental organizations such as the German Green Party's Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Canadian International Development Agency. As such, they must sometimes tailor their projects to fit within grant requirements or proposed research agendas. As Umam D&R notes in the section about partners and donors on its website:

> It would certainly be easier for us to operate according to the adage, '…give to Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's.' Yet not everything can be so easily rendered, and the invaluable counsel we receive from one source can be every bit as helpful as the financial support we receive from another. Therefore, UMAM D&R consistently mixes Casear's things with God's.

Of course it is impossible to gage how much competition for funding influences the aims of Lokman, Monika, and others who work at Umam D&R. But beyond this, it is not necessary to assess to what extent funding is a determining factor to appreciate that Umam D&R actively engages in the market for support and therefore allows such sponsors to influence their mission (as the organization also influences the access these sponsors have to Lebanese society).

The influence of international financing on Umam D&R can be most clearly seen perhaps in the language the organization employs to get its message across. While many

of the publications that accompany their events (or in some cases are produced afterward as an account of what occurred) feature Arabic text, virtually all are presented in English. The Umam D&R website is also entirely in English, although the archive site, "Memory at Work," was originally created in Arabic and only later translated into English.[4] While English is taught in Lebanese public schools, the country's official language designated in the Lebanese constitution is Arabic, with French indicated as a secondary language necessary in certain instances.[5] That Umam D&R privileges English over Arabic – and notably on its main digital platform, where it arguably has the broadest reach – signifies something about a section of the organization's intended audience, especially when it is recognized that the majority of the organization's funds come from international donors.[6] It also speaks to broader trends in the makeup of Umam D&R's constituency: they are educated with some exposure to English or connections outside of Lebanon. This marks Umam D&R as unique from the community in the surrounding vicinity.

[4] The sources including in the database are largely articles from Arabic periodicals, but there has been a concerted effort to translate the title and first line of the text into English to extend access to foreign researchers.

[5] According to a text from 2010, 70% of secondary education in Lebanon is conducted in French while 30 % is in English. Jean-Benoit Nadeau, Julie Barlow, 311. https://books.google.com/books?id=NN5oc0HFC7QC&pg=PA311#v=onepage&q&f=false

[6] It should be noted that while the Umam D&R Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/umam.dr/) similarly features content in English, the information it shares about upcoming events is often in both English and Arabic.

## Dahiyeh: Geography of Separation

Perhaps the most unique thing about Umam D&R as an organization is its continued presence in the Shi'a sectarian space of Beirut's southern suburb, far from the chic city center or major cultural districts such as majority-Muslim Hamra and Christian Achrafieh. A recent article by Michael Specter published in the *New York Times T Magazine* titled "The Eternal Magic of Beirut" describes the area of town as dangerous and unlikely to be visited by outsiders: "There are parts of Beirut that are clearly unsafe; but tourists don't, as a rule, hang out in Hezbollah-controlled territory."[7] This piece joins a tradition of recurrent and powerful representations of the city that celebrate the cosmopolitan nature and cultural vigor of central Beirut while eschewing its southern districts. In addition, such works serve to recast geo-sectarian boundaries as cultural divisions, both forms of the border that Umam D&R seeks to challenge.

Sectarianism in Lebanon is a system of patronage determined by historical socio-economic and religious differences that has come to define geo-political identities in the country. It is also entrenched in the sectarian political system established under the National Pact in 1943, which requires citizens to vote according to their religious affiliation and allots certain powers to different groups. The tenuous unity of Lebanon, deeply divided along these sectarian lines but committed to a shaky truce established at the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1991, has in the past given way to division along the lines of this underlying geographic and social fragmentation. When threatened with

[7] Michael Specter, "The Eternal Magic of Beirut," *T Magazine*, May 2 2016.

conflict, various communities have exceeded the borders created around them by the sectarian state, as was the case in 2008 when members of Hezbollah's military wing occupied the streets of traditionally Sunni west Beirut. As more horror is unleashed on one community, the spatial barriers between it and the other groups also become more well defined, whether by way of physical security checkpoints or social imaginaries. Throughout this thesis, reference to "sectarianism," and the social milieus that emerge from it, is used to indicate these imagined communal differences that historically have been grounded in socio-economic disparities more than doctrinal divisions.

In the logic of the sectarian division of space, Umam D&R is located in the Shi'a district of Haret Hreik, part of the larger Shi'a area south of Beirut. Since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1991, the most significant barrier has increasingly been that between the southern suburbs of Beirut and the rest of the city. There is a historic and official line separating central Beirut and its southern suburb that defies the usual dichotomy of metropolis as core and marginal community as periphery. In the century or so of its existence, the southern suburb has been divided from Beirut by a municipal boundary and entrenched geographic sectarianism informed by the standard narrative of the movement of impoverished Shi'a population from rural south Lebanon to the capital's urban fringes. In recent decades, this division has been reinforced by Dahiyeh's protected status under the control of armed political group Hezbollah.

Originally dubbed *Al-Dahiyeh al-Janubiyeh* in Arabic, literally meaning "the southern suburb" or "the southern outskirt," the area has come to be called simply

"Dahiyeh" in popular speech. It is home to well over half a million Lebanese and covers an area the same size as municipal Beirut itself, which also has an estimated population of about half a million within its city limits.[8] Despite this numeric and spatial significance, the area has been perceived in the official consciousness since its earliest incarnation as the marginalized and impoverished "other" to the core of metropolitan Beirut.[9] This image has been further accentuated by Israel's repeated targeting of this area throughout its history, first during the Lebanese civil war due to the area's proximity to Palestinian refugee camps such as Sabra and Shatila, and then (as a product of this earlier encounter) due to Israel's ongoing conflict with Hezbollah.

The cluster of neighborhoods south of Beirut's city limits that make up the distinctive geographic entity of the southern suburb falls under the jurisdiction of four municipal districts. From the northern boundary of the Tayyouneh Roundabout to the southern district of Tahwitet al-Ghadir where Beirut International Airport is located, they are: Chiyah, Ghobeiry, Haret Hreik, and Burj al-Barajneh, which is home to a Palestinian refugee camp.[10] After the resumption of municipal elections in 1998 following a 35-year hiatus in Lebanon, these cities have functioned on a bureaucratic level in much the same way as other peripheral districts of Beirut. However, what distinguishes the southern

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[8] Lara; Harb Deeb, Mona, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 46-47. Accurate population counts are difficult to come by in Lebanon, where an official census has not been taken since that conducted by the French in 1932, which set the proportions that determine representation in the sectarian system. Since the influx of Syrian refugees beginning in 2011, the population in Beirut has changed dramatically.

[9] Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 422-23.

[10] Beirut is located on a peninsula with the Mediterranean Sea to the north and west and mountains to the east. During the Civil War, the city was divided between the Muslim west and the Christian east, and this divide still largely exists today.

suburb from those to the east along the foothills of Mount Lebanon are the political and economic disparities between them and central Beirut, which have been defined increasingly under the banner of sectarianism, and the social-spatial boundary these disparities have engendered.

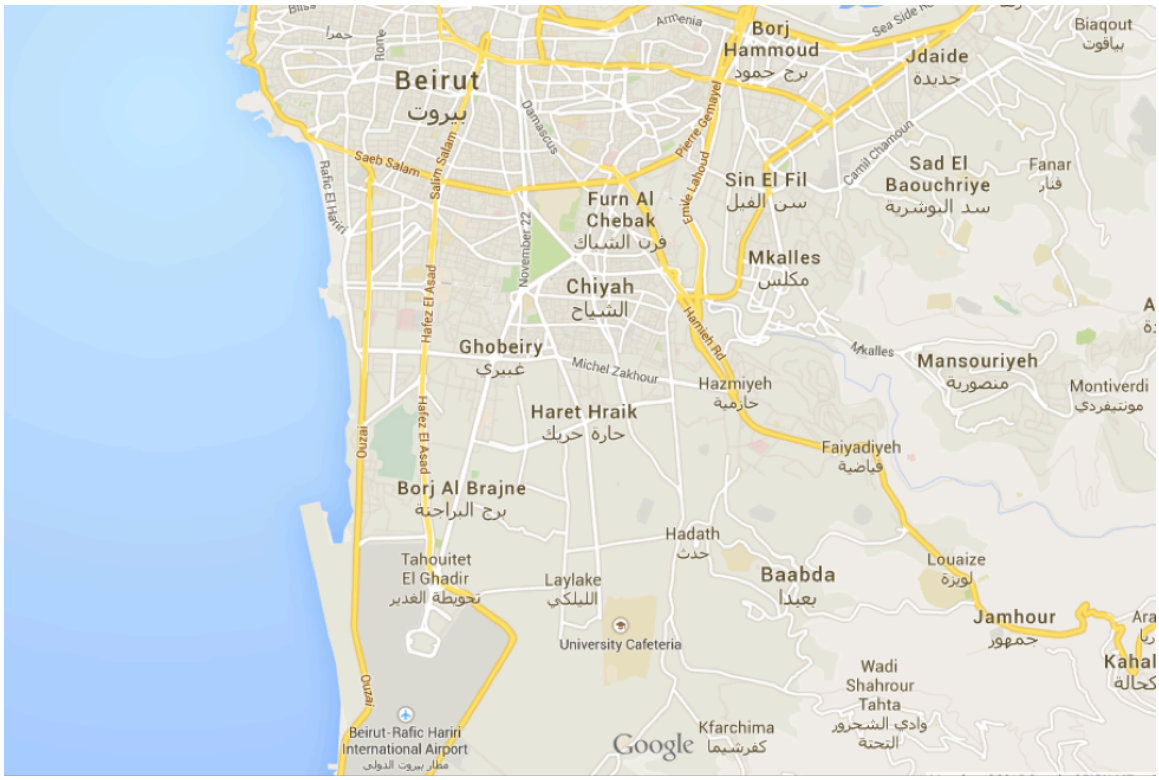


Figure 2 Map of Dahiyeh and its surroundings.[11]

On April 30, 2013, Hezbollah's leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah announced what many Lebanese had long suspected: that his group was engaged in fighting on the side of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the neighboring country's war and had been for

[11] *Beirut, Lebanon*, 2015, scale undetermined; generated using "Google" (29 March 2015).

several months.[12] Syria's civil war, which grew out of nonviolent protests inspired by the popular Arab Spring movements throughout the region in April 2011, at this time pitted Assad's beleaguered regime forces against a growing number of Islamist militant groups and the Western-backed Free Syrian Army with ties to the Syrian National Coalition formed in Doha the previous fall. Nasrallah's speech acknowledged the role Hezbollah's armed branch was playing by providing military and logistical support for Assad's army in their battle against opposition forces in the area surrounding Al-Qusair near Syria's border with Lebanon.

In the year following this announcement, there were a series of car bombings carried out in Dahiyeh that were claimed by Sunni Islamist groups fighting the regime (and thus Hezbollah) in Syria. Popular response in Lebanon underscored the perceived divide in the country between city and suburb, and at the same time undermined it by emphasizing unity in the face of such attacks. Conventional media coverage, opinion pieces, social media campaigns, and public discussion of the bombings, which began in July 2013 and culminated with seven separate attacks in January and February 2014, presented substantial challenges to the common conception of the southern suburb as separate from Beirut in the Lebanese consciousness.

For Umam D&R, however, the attacks made it increasingly difficult to draw in those from central Beirut to attend their events due to the increased security and tense atmosphere. At the time, the group posted on the website of their exhibition space The

[12] Wassim Mroueh, El-Basha, Thomas, "Syria Allies Will Prevent Fall of Assad Regime: Hezbollah," *The Daily Star*, April 30 2013.

Hangar that they would no longer be carrying out events there due to the security situation. Though there have been some small exhibitions and film screenings held there organized by other groups and NGOs, the halt in large-scale projects in the space has effected moral at Umam D&R, with obvious uncertainty for the future creeping into conversations I had with those who live and work at Villa Slim.

## Genealogy of an Encounter

I originally heard of Umam D&R when a friend got a job there at the end of my first visit to Lebanon in the summer of 2011. But it wasn't until the following year, when I moved to Beirut, that I met Lokman and Monika and began interning with the organization as a translator for the "Memory at Work" digitization project. I worked with Umam D&R for several months before moving onto other things, but I continued doing supplementary translation and editing jobs for the organization as well as Dar al Jadeed over the two years I lived in Beirut. From this early experience, I got a sense of how Umam D&R was structured and the way projects were conceived of and realized. Perhaps more importantly, I also began to know the figures that shaped the organization through Lokman's lengthy philosophic emails, Monika's habit of disappearing into her work for hours at a time, and the abundant, oppressive cigarette smoke that filled the office anytime either of the two stopped by for a meeting.

In particular from this time, I remember mornings spent on the second floor of Villa Slim, where Rasha keeps her private office from which she has run Dar al Jadeed since closing the publishing house's headquarters in the Hamra district of Beirut. I worked with Rasha on several books following my internship at Umam D&R and would often stop by for a Turkish coffee and a chat. I went most frequently in spring and early summer of 2013, when the scent of star jasmine becomes overpowering and the bougainvillea are just beginning to emerge along walls all over Beirut. Rasha lives and works in the airy second floor of Villa Slim, and her office at the northwest corner opens

onto a gleaming white balcony that wraps around half the building. All four of the walls in the room feature floor-to-ceiling white shelves stacked with books and, like the furniture in the rest of the house, the ornate table and chairs that serve as a desk are painted opaque white. In addition to the books, colorful cushions and an elaborate Turkish kilim underfoot break up the monochromatic color scheme. Rasha referred to it as her "place in the world."

Figure 3 View from Rasha's balcony.[13]

As the conflict in neighboring Syria intensified, our talk often turned from book projects to the atmosphere in the area and rumors of Hezbollah's involvement on the side

[13] Rasha al Ameer, "View from Our Balcony," https://www.facebook.com/Dar.aljadeed/photos.

of Assad's forces. Rasha, in language reminiscent of her brother's liberal idealist rhetoric but decidedly more pessimistic, regularly lamented the changes she had seen overcome Dahiyeh from her place on the serene balcony. She spoke of the trees that once lined the streets, the peace and tranquility one could find in the gardens, the altogether different character of the neighborhood. Most of all, she spoke of the past as if it were another place entirely, a space that seemingly no longer existed beyond the old house and the grounds that surrounded it.

The question of the past's power in the present looms large at Villa Slim, both in the talk of people such as Lokman and Rasha as well as the work carried out by Umam D&R on the ground floor, where they maintain offices and their archive. As Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*, "Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination."[14] The most clearly formed memories I have of the time I spent at Umam D&R are of the place itself, the soaring ceilings and dusty rooms awkwardly reconfigured to fit some idea of how a modern archive's office should look, the dark hallways leading to a cramped kitchen in the back where a domestic worker from Sudan was often sent to make coffee or tea for guests.

My aim in returning in the summer of 2015 was to study the partialities of imagination that inform the way space has been used both at Villa Slim and Umam

[14] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964), xxxii.

D&R's exhibition space next door, The Hangar. But more than this, I sought to understand the way imaginings of space become re-inscribed in Umam D&R's efforts to bring to light certain historical narratives. As Bachelard goes on to state, "images do not adapt themselves very well to quiet ideas, or above all, to definite ideas. The imagination is ceaselessly imagining and enriching itself with new images."[15] Through interviews with founders and staff, participant observation of daily life, analysis of the various digital and physical documents the organization has produced, and engagement with broader movements of which Umam D&R is part, I hope to capture in the following pages the trajectory of this organization's imaginings of space, place, and memory.

[15] Ibid.

# CHAPTER ONE: VILLA SLIM

## I: Entering Villa Slim

The walk from the Musharifiyyeh underpass directly east to the complex in which Umam D&R is housed takes less than five minutes. The strong smell of coffee from the Café Maatouk roasters located across from the compound's entrance signals that the diagonal intersection of Imam Musa al-Sadr Road and the small nameless street on which Villa Mohsen Slim is located must be nearby. Before this, there is a furniture store, a juice shop, and a small storefront selling live poultry from cages lined up along the sidewalk. Turning left just before Al-Mahdi Mosque, crossing the small street, and stepping through the imposing arches onto the Slim family property initially feels like walking into another world. The dogs that patrol the grounds – a rare sight in Dahiyeh – ranging in number from one to four at any time, eye visitors suspiciously and bark as they trot by, but the trees and leafy bushes shading the villa's immediate surroundings offer a contrast with the busy shop-lined street outside to the unfamiliar visitor (both to the neighborhood and Umam D&R). The walled-in garden is not always quiet and tranquil but still somehow calm.

This specific experience of arriving and entering Villa Slim should not underscore some inherent, categorical difference between Villa Slim and its surroundings, but highlight the air of difference that has come to define the place. Indeed, this perceived divide between the compound and the increasingly homogenized character of the Haret

Hreik district has become a defining feature of the organization and the work it does. The archive and cultural space sets as its goal to collect, protect, and promote "important artifacts and evidence" of Lebanon's "relatively recent past," with special emphasis placed on documents dealing with the period of the country's civil war from 1975 to 1991 and its aftermath.[16] When describing the work of the archive, the organization's founders and staff emphasize that the compound is a safe place for controversial accounts and alternative narratives in an increasingly sectarian environment, both locally and nationally. The house embodies the future the organization wishes to project as well as a version of the past.

Walking further into the Villa Slim compound along the semicircular drive, the large white manor with its green shutters looms near at hand on the right. A grand entrance to the space that serves as home base for the archive and its staff is no longer possible due to the house's reconfiguration as an office – the central door to the ground floor is bypassed and instead one enters around the corner to the left through new glass doors protecting the old wooden ones. From this side, the building's windows look out on the large garden that runs along the sides and back of the house, as well as the paths leading off to smaller buildings shielded by fruit trees and crawling with bougainvillea. Immediately inside the house-cum-office is a long white hall that once served as the sitting room to Villa Slim's original occupants some 150 years ago.[17] New clear glass

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[16] Umam Documentation and Research, "About Us".

[17] The family is unsure the year construction began but they have found stones dating back to the 1860s. Lokman Slim, interview by Katherine Maddox, June 29, 2015.

partitions are meant to designate office spaces and the walls are decorated with posters from previous events and exhibitions hosted by Umam D&R. Intricate stained-glass trifore (triple arch windows, also called *mandalouns*) above the door and the shuttered windows flanking it hint at what the room once was, and the faintly musty scent of a home that has withstood a century and a half of comings and goings permeates the room – a rare experience in a neighborhood where most buildings were constructed in the past 30 years.

The effort to remake this historic house as a base for the archive and its staff with the introduction of subtle panes of glass that transparently redirect traffic and protect the structure reflects the way the organization employs the space figuratively to [re]create its identity in the present. Those who work there cite stories of the building's unique history as a motivating factor for Umam D&R's ongoing projects aimed at introducing alternative narratives into Lebanon's fractured national history. To those involved with the organization, the house represents a Benjaminian nostalgia, a space where memory "flashes up" to give a glimpse of all the possible presents that never were.[18] And as a nostalgic space, Villa Slim invites guests to indulge in the past as observers of bygone days and as possible participants in their restoration. A study focused on understanding this nostalgia as well as a descriptive analysis of the house itself, including an engagement with its past, will show how stories about this space are inscribed and reimagined in the archival work of the organization.

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[18] Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

Figure 4 Villa Slim office.[19]

[19] Umam Documentation and Research, "Umam D&R Photos," https://www.facebook.com/umam.dr/photos.

## II: The House and Its Memories

"Going back to the topic of why Lokman wanted Umam D&R to be here in Dahiyeh," Maha said, settling into her chair one warm June morning. Maha, as I would like to call her, whose official title at Umam D&R was "executive assistant" but who oversaw all the daily work of maintaining the archive's office, spent the bulk of her days at Umam D&R directing things from the head of an oversized white table that takes up the bulk of her crowded office. She continued, "Not just because, he can invest this space – this is his house – he can use this ground floor. Absolutely not, it wasn't this reason. The reason was because Lokman wanted to bring back to Dahiyeh its better reputation."

Like many Mediterranean buildings, Villa Slim's rooms feature high ceilings that enable the warm air in summer to travel up, away from the living space. But in Maha's office, three of the four walls are covered in shelves stacked all the way to the top with boxes and files, records recounting the organization's ten years of existence. For the past seven of these years, Maha, who also hails from Dahiyeh, has overseen the daily rhythms of the archive, managing translators, project heads, researchers, and guests alike. After a pause, she concluded: "It's not just this place [Dahiyeh] today where you find ladies wearing long black gowns [perhaps referring to Iranian chadors]. No, it's not. Girls here also once wore sleeveless tops and mini skirts. It's not what you think, this place called Dahiyeh."[20]

[20] Maha, interview by Katherine Maddox, June 9, 2015.

The underlying assertion of what Maha said that day – that Umam D&R's presence in the house, and the neighborhood, could help revive something of the "old Dahiyeh" – is one often repeated by those involved with the organization whenever the topic of Villa Slim is raised. In fact, this nostalgic narrative served as the inspiration for an early project displayed at Umam D&R's neighboring exhibition space The Hangar (titled "Collecting Dahiyeh," this show receives a full evaluation in a later chapter). But the vision of the proposed rejuvenation for Southern Beirut that Umam D&R seeks to usher in with its "citizen's archive" is by no means consistent among its directors and staff. For some associated with the organizations, such as Lokman's sister Rasha al-Ameer as well as Maha, the importance of the house as the site of Umam D&R's popular memory projects and archive is inspired by a certain sense for the way things once were. Conversely, for others, including co-founders Lokman and his wife, Monika, such longing for a space of the past is problematic, and they are quick to deny that their work's relationship to the place in which it is carried out could be influenced by these sentiments, instead favoring a narrative of future possibilities. The two approaches, however, are not mutually exclusive. Both groups engage in a social process of nostalgia that allows those at Umam D&R to experience "the now" simultaneous with "the then," two temporal moments occurring concurrently in the words and actions of the organization.

During that same meeting with Maha, she painted a picture of Dahiyeh's past, contending that some of these ways of life continued in the present.

> There are people who still live in Dahiyeh and each day, every day, have their tea at five. This area is very well known for its lemon trees and for the blossoms of the lemon trees. It was an occasion for those ladies, for the old ladies, to meet each day at five. It was a British thing, a traditional thing, to meet at five for tea in one of the gardens [of this area].[21]

As she made this last statement, she spread her arm open toward the window, as if there might still be some women outside on the Villa Slim grounds drinking their afternoon tea. When speaking largely in English, Maha often shifted between present and past tense when describing the history of Dahiyeh and the house. For her, this past was integrally bound with the practices of the present. On numerous occasions she drew connections between the way Lokman's father, MP Mohsen Slim, had run the house as a welcoming space where people from the neighborhood came to meet and seek help, and the way Umam D&R, as directed by Lokman, was carrying this tradition forward by inviting people in to debate their history and hiring employees from the area.

[21] Ibid.

Figure 5 View of Umam D&R gardens from above.[22]

Still, Maha, like many others at Umam D&R, acknowledged the difficulties of drawing such a connection between the past and the present. “The neighbors, at the beginning of the thing, they were coming. Not all of them of course, but a few of them, they were coming,” she recalled. “And later on, it was not very common with them because as harsh as the situation was … maybe Lokman and the exhibitions were more controversial.”[23] While recognizing the limits that the organization faced to attracting an

[22] Umam Documentation and Research, "Umam D&R Photos".
[23] Maha.

audience, particularly in the aftermath of the spate of bombings and subsequent security crisis beginning in 2013, Maha nonetheless saw the house as a meeting place for people of the neighborhood, both in its capacity as a cultural hub and a public archive. Through this view, she emphasized the historic role that the house, and thus the organization, had played in Dahiyeh despite the now-politically contentious position of both.

In contrast to Maha, Lokman's sister Rasha shared the belief that the house serves as a signifier of a more courteous past in the present but her intimate knowledge of the space was more bound up with the sense of loss she attributed to the transformation of the neighborhood surrounding it. As mentioned before, Rasha is head of the publishing house Dar al Jadeed and now runs the business alone from the second floor of Villa Slim. She has also occasionally been involved with Umam D&R's events and, through her role as a publisher, oversees the production of supplementary materials for the organization. In addition to this, she has lived above the organization's headquarters since its inception, and therefore offered an interesting perspective on the daily goings-on of Umam D&R and the house. Her take on the organization is closely connected to her feelings about her home and the surrounding neighborhood.

As Ann Stoler notes in her 2008 essay on imperial debris, ruination as a concept can be used to identify "what people are 'left with' … the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things."[24] While in the case of Villa Slim, the house is not in a state of evident ruination, the house's legacy and the perception that it is representative

[24] Ann Laura Stoler, ed. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 194.

of a bygone era speaks to the process of situating "what remains," as outlined by Stoler. Rasha's accounts of Villa Slim in the past and the present fit within this framework, revealing a nostalgia for the "then" that is driven more by a loss of something in the "now." "We are trying still to be independent in one way or another," she explained.

> We try to say hello, we try to be nice with the other cousins [those who are members of Hezbollah], you know? But this is not the education of Hezbollah and [Harakat] Amal.[25] It was the previous education of their fathers, who were tolerant. This tolerance, this coexistence, is not at all the trend today. But we maintain a tradition from a past that we really cherished here at the compound. I think my father, my grandfather, cherished this way of living too, you know?[26]

The way of living that once existed in the area is still part of Rasha's daily life, and she recognized that it also informed the work that her brother and his organization carried out on the ground floor. But unlike others who occupy the house, Rasha described Villa Slim as a remainder from a time that had since become history. With respect to the archive and the material stored on the bottom floor, she said she didn't see why it was necessary to keep these physical documents, particularly in a part of town so marred by violence that it was becoming unrecognizable to her. Instead, she felt they should be digitized as quickly as possible so that they could be shared more widely online.[27]

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[25] Haraket Amal, or Hope Movement in English, is the other prominent Shi'a party in Lebanon and thus a competitor to Hezbollah though they often work together in government as part of the March 8 bloc. It was founded as the "Movement of the Dispossessed" in 1974 and in the early 1980s religious members of the group who had fallen out with Amal leader Nabih Berri went on to establish Hezbollah.
[26] Rasha al Ameer, interview by Katherine Maddox, June 18, 2015.
[27] Ibid.

Later, Rasha recounted the history of the house's construction. She detailed how in the 1860s when her great-grandfather built the first floor of the house her family had been only "peasant" farmers like many in the area, but her grandfather already had bigger plans. He was "someone who was witty and bright but he was not literate. He never went to school. But he was someone who had ambitions," she said.[28] Eventually, her grandfather began commuting to Beirut and working as a merchant, enabling him to add another floor for his children. He was also able to send his only son, Mohsen Slim, to a French school to become a lawyer and ultimately a member of parliament. This story of Rasha and Lokman's ancestor rising above his socio-economic standing through a unique sense of determination and, in turn, securing a place of prominence for the family in the neighborhood was also reiterated by others at Umam D&R.[29] As an origin story, it directly relates to the narratives of Lokman and those involved with the organization in their self-declared aim to rise above the sectarian politics of the area. But the fascination with the story speaks to the nostalgic impulse of the individual to "have a picture of himself" and therefore "master his own experience."[30]

Such a narrative also hints at the distinctive worldview of the family, a product of the broader bourgeois habits of the twentieth century Beiruti merchant class to which they indirectly belonged as well as the French education system and the cultural concepts

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Maha insisted that Lokman was not raised on religion, but "morals."
[30] Fredric Jameson, "Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia," *Salmagundi*, no. 10/11 (1969): 54.

of égalité and laïcité that are integral to it.[31] Indeed, the idea that the house, its gardens, and the surrounding buildings affiliated with the organization could again serve as a neutral meeting ground for those of all classes and religions (and, in fact, that they once did at all) reflects a particular Enlightenment-influenced, secular outlook that, on the surface, appears to privilege numerous viewpoints. The narratives of those associated with Villa Slim highlighting the peaceful, calm atmosphere of the compound inherently place it in opposition with the communal, conflict-ridden chaos outside its walls. It appears as a place situated beyond the sectarian politics and tension that plague Lebanese society, in both form and function.

As scholars such as Talal Asad have noted, however, secularism as a political medium within the undertaking of modernity (a project often synonymous with the West) also perpetuates exclusionary practices. By "vindicat[ing] the essential freedom and responsibility of the sovereign self in opposition to the constraints of that self by religious discourses," liberal rhetoric puts secularism in opposition with religion, among other things, so that some citizens remain inherently on the outside.[32] Secularism's "tolerance" not only cannot undo such divisions but has also helped to foster or even create them. In the case of Umam D&R, the constituency the organization is known to attract echoes this contradiction within liberal logic: Lara Deeb and Mona Harb in a footnote in their book *Leisurely Islam* describe the group as organizing "cultural events, including exhibition,

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[31] Jens Hanssen, *Fin-De-Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford, U.K.; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 2005).
[32] Talal Asad, ed. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 16. Assad in fact argues that the equation of the two at all is a fallacy.

lectures, and film screenings that attract a primarily [central] Beiruti intellectual audience to Dahiya." They go on to note that Umam D&R "prides itself on offering an open platform for debate as well as providing alcohol on site in direct defiance of both Hizbullah and the dominant local moral climate."[33]

It is not only in Villa Slim's most recent incarnation that the social barrier between religious and secular has made it a place accessible to only some despite declarations that it welcomes all. Another legacy of the house offered by those that now live and work there as evidence of its unique character, was that of the celebrations once held on the grounds and the types of people who would attend in years past. In an interview conducted for the "Collecting Dahiyeh" exhibition, Lokman and Rasha's mother Salma Slim spoke fondly of the parties she and her MP husband had hosted in the space, welcoming political figures and foreign ambassadors (including, at one point, the American ambassador) to their then "well guarded compound" far from the center of government and the usual sites of such events.[34] Maha and Rasha both mentioned these cocktail parties as examples of a unique element from Villa Slim's past that influenced the perspective of those occupying the space today.[35] But aims to create or recreate a more refined, cosmopolitan past in the present also recreate the exclusionary practices inherent to such liberal, secular projects. And when these memories are put into action in

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[33] Deeb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*, 232.
[34] Shelby Scates, *War and Politics by Other Means: A Journalist's Memoir* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 157.
[35] Maha, 2015., al Ameer, R. 2015.

service of an organization (with its own unique political motives) as a kind of foundational allegory, deeper histories are upended and elided.

Such stories of the past that revealed a longing to (re)live it in the present were not the only way those that lived and worked in the house explained the importance of the space to Umam D&R in its efforts to draw people in and stake a claim to history. Monika and Lokman offered a more pragmatic take on the influence of certain histories at Villa Slim and the way nostalgia informed the work of the organization. As co-founders of Umam D&R (which, as mentioned earlier, frequently seeks funding through outside grants and endowments on a platform of inclusivity), the two were more cautious about using inadvertently exclusionary rhetoric (a practice that will be taken up in more detail in the following chapter). Instead, both focused on the future role the house could play in the neighborhood as a historic cultural hub, and the only one in Dahiyeh. They said little about specific memories of Villa Slim's past or the values inherent to it, and instead saw the compound's legacy as representing a different kind of continuity that could persevere in the face of disinterest beyond their walls. In this way, their engagement with the past in the present attempted to create a "rupture" where an alternative present could exist.[36] Speaking of Villa Slim, Monika and Lokman cited the importance of the building's age in pushing back against the dominant narrative within Dahiyeh (that of Hezbollah and

[36] Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

their constituents) and its justification for Umam D&R to carry on with its work to challenge such narratives in the future.[37]

Of those involved with the organization, Monika was the only permanent member who is not of Lebanese origin, and one of just a few not from Dahiyeh. Reflecting on the house, she highlighted the power the structure's past could hold in an area with few historic buildings: "In a way, we were here before Hezbollah existed. So this is extremely important. I mean, I was not here personally but the house was here for a long time, a hundred years before there was something called Hezbollah."[38] The notion that the house has stood for longer than any building in the immediate vicinity, in combination with the family's patrician legacy, is used to validate the work that is being done there today: exhibitions and cultural projects that are critical of the entire Lebanese system, but often particularly adversarial to Hezbollah and Harakat Amal (the other dominant Shi'a party in the area and a partner of Hezbollah in government), and the less-subversive archive collection. While the particular pace and feel of everyday life on the compound in the past may not be privileged in Monika's position, there is still a sense that Villa Slim's particular past allows its inhabitants and guests to question a present that they do not find satisfactory.

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[37] It should be noted that though Lokman stated the earliest foundations of the house dated to the 1860s and was likely built before his great-grandfather lifetime, the structure itself went through distinctive stages of construction to become the shape it is today. According to Lokman, it was his grandfather that built the second floor and his father added the third, as well as several outlying buildings around the property. Nevertheless, Villa Slim's appearance has remained largely unchanged over the course of Lokman and Rasha's lifetimes and therefore it is this iteration of the structure that is embedded in their imaginations.

[38] Monika Borgmann, interview by Katherine Maddox, July 1, 2015.

Still, Monika's concern appeared more for the relationship of the house to its surroundings, and not to specifics of its past. Her main office was housed in a freestanding white building measuring about 150 square meters and located several paces back from the grand manor. Consisting of plain white walls with no shuttered windows or traditional architectural details like the house, the square building was constructed much more recently and allowed Monika to come and go unnoticed, a level of spatial autonomy not possible for those working in Villa Slim proper. Monika's place at the organization seemed similarly removed from the daily workings of the archive and its staff. While she occasionally met with Maha and took care of paperwork from a desk in a room across the hall from where the bulk of the periodicals are kept in the house itself, she mostly worked from her separate office or sometimes an archival space the organization kept in the Badaro district, about a five minute drive without traffic on the other side of the Beirut city limits. Overall, Monika was much more involved with the cultural projects and outreach of Umam D&R, and less with the place-conscious construction of an archive that those working in the house were confronted with.

Similarly, Lokman splits his time between Umam D&R and his other organization Hayya Bina, "a Lebanese civic initiative dedicated to offering a platform for moderate, liberal and independent voices."[39] This group, founded a few years after Umam D&R, is more politically oriented, and therefore controversial, as far as Hezbollah and its allies are concerned. It largely focuses on carrying out civil society initiatives in majority Shi'a

[39] "Hayya Bina," http://daleel-madani.org/profile/hayya-bina.

areas where such tasks would usually fall to Hezbollah. Hayya Bina, unlike Umam D&R, is housed outside of Dahiyeh in a nondescript office building in the nearby neighborhood of Ain al-Rummaneh. While there are clear political and practical reasons the offices should be in Ain al-Rummaneh (being a majority Christian area, it is outside the direct jurisdiction of Hezbollah), the lack of rhetoric about place that accompanies the narratives of Hayya Bina highlights the difference between the work carried out there and that of Umam D&R. In opposition to this, as a family house in an overtly sectarian space, Villa Slim's stories directly effect affairs at the Umam D&R offices and nostalgia seeps into many of the organization's projects.

Explaining his initial decision to return to Dahiyeh to found Dar al Jadeed following his return from France at the end of the Lebanese civil war and eventually to launch Umam D&R in the same space, Lokman cited his feelings of civic responsibility for the place in which he grew up. He said that,

> This was part of a personal decision to go back to Dahiyeh, in a way. They say politics mixes up with other elements. … Obviously there is something very personal on the one hand but there is also the idea that part of my personal citizen commitment is not to let this area become a ghetto. Perhaps I am bothering the ghetto.[40]

Despite declaring that Dahiyeh had come to be perceived as a sort of ghetto, Lokman was cautious not to assert that what went on within the compound was in any way more civilized than the everyday life outside its walls, and he also openly critiqued the "urban

[40] Slim, L. 2015.

fragmentation" he saw taking place in Dahiyeh as well as the agents responsible for it. For him, the image of Dahiyeh as a marginal area under the full control of Hezbollah could be prevented from becoming reality through an emphasis on other ways of life that exist in the area (no matter how few of these there may be). His understanding of Villa Slim's importance as a place where such alternative stories existed was no doubt informed by similar experiences as those of Rasha – he too grew up witnessing the cocktail parties.[41] But his emphasis extended to how the place *is* and *could be*, not only how it *was*. In sharing his perspective in a more formal context, and particularly to someone not from the area, he walked a fine line between dwelling on memories of the place and presenting an inclusive outlook that served his organization's mission.

In fact, he was well aware of the risk he ran in romanticizing the house because, at various times in the history of the organization, he had been critiqued by the media for indulging a longing for the past at the expense of reality in Dahiyeh. In response to the "Collecting Dahiyeh" exhibition, Lokman recalled an article written for the Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar* (known for having close ties to Hezbollah) that accused him of "a nostalgia for a kind of world I'm trying to salvage."[42] He maintained that he accepted this perception as just one view of many he may not agree with. He went on to explain the way Dahiyeh, and the house as a unique place in it, played a multi-faceted role in motivating the work he does with Umam D&R:

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[41] Maha, 2015.
[42] Slim, L. 2015.

> I consider the Dahiyeh part of my identity. I never denied the fact that there are two layers regarding this area: There is the layer pre-Dahiyeh and the layer of Dahiyeh. And personally I don't think that these two layers conflict in my mind or my behavior. I don't have a bucolic dream to bring Dahiyeh back to a pastoral past.[43]

Through this somewhat complicated logic, Lokman maintained that Villa Slim was an exceptional, historic place that could signify certain narratives of the past while also distancing himself from the accusation that he was out of touch with the reality of Dahiyeh in the present or trying to bring this past back.

As Kathleen Stewart notes in her treatment of nostalgia, for some "on the 'margins' the social world is not reified and fixed but thrown into flux and doubleness."[44] While that doubleness more likely refers to the "other" residents of Dahiyeh (those that are typically perceived as dwelling in a slum and therefore "speak 'incorrectly' and 'inefficiently'" in the eyes of many in central Beirut), there is an aspect of it in Lokman's understanding of his past. The stories told about the place are indeed important, but do not serve as a direct blueprint for the changes Lokman (and his colleagues) sought to enact through their work. Instead, in his narratives about the place, he attempted to rediscover "remainders" of what was once thought to be lost and to use these discoveries for the future, not as a model for the present.

In addressing the significance of Villa Slim as a place, Lokman and Monika both highlighted its relationship to the area surrounding it more than intimate impressions and

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Kathleen Stewart, "Nostalgia – a Polemic," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (1988): 228.

stories of the space itself. But those stories still lay at the center of their understanding of the house, its heritage, and the impact it had on their work. Returning to the conception of Villa Slim as a ruin signifying the image of a particular past in the area, the co-founders also invoked a similar approach, emphasizing the outward perception by those in the neighborhood of "what remains" in their rhetoric. Lokman argued that "it took time to build a relationship, not of confidence but of understanding," between Umam D&R and those from the surrounding area. The building blocks upon which this understanding – important to the organization's message of inclusivity – was constructed were those of the house and its historic significance. In order to defend the organization's often theoretical interventions into the production of Lebanese history and the reimagining of secular citizenship from attacks that it is too elitist and (central) "Beiruti," the house in all its nostalgic glory becomes the center of a narrative of continuity firmly grounded in the historic records of the archive. It has always existed in Dahiyeh, and this justifies its ongoing existence and the work done there.

## III: Archiving the Past in the Present

Despite the importance of accessibility implied by the moniker "citizen's archive," one thing guests do not find upon entering the Umam D&R archive is a comprehensive, searchable catalogue of all the newspapers, magazine, books, "gray literature," and objects housed within the complex. Instead, a few incomplete lists and the memories of staff members keep track of the documents stacked to the ceiling of a small room (probably formally a maid's quarter) and an in-progress library a few paces down the hall on the ground floor. More delicate items have been stored offsite since the building sustained major damage from Israeli bombardment during the 2006 war with Israel.[45] Together, this collection (or the idea of it) forms the heart of the organization and the cultural projects carried out there, and it constitutes the structural embodiment of the wide-ranging nostalgia addressed previously.

Umam D&R is part of a growing group of private organizations in Lebanon, and the greater Middle East, with an archive serving as the base of their cultural work and united by their affiliation with the Modern Heritage Observatory, a network of institutions whose focus is the preservation of the region's cultural heritage. Like the archives of nation-states, these collections tell the stories of specific subjects in the region: modern Lebanese architecture, photography and film in the Middle East, and political posters from the Lebanese civil war.[46] Some contain the compilation of one

[45] The way such damage affected Villa Slims' relationship to the neighborhood will be explored in a later chapter.

[46] The Arab Center for Architecture, Arab Image Foundation, and Signs of Conflict, respectively.

private individual, others the full record of various newspapers that have been published for over a century, but all highlight a specific narrative with an underlying logic supported by the documents they privilege in their collections. In the case of Umam D&R, the story is that of the Lebanese civil war, with all its many twists and turns. But the underlying logic of the organization's presentation of "multiple narratives" from all sides of the war is that there is a particular Lebanese national identity to be salvaged from this violent past.

Broadly, the archive in its current form is a place where historic documents are housed for reference and study, and it plays a central role in the construction of certain narratives both about Umam D&R and Lebanon during the war. Its shape and structure recall that of the national archive, which according to Umam D&R's rhetoric, Lebanon is sorely lacking.[47] In his work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson designates the census, the map, and the museum as the "three institutions of power" that allowed colonizing nations of Europe to expand their dominion across the world with the help of mechanical reproduction. In a similar way, he acknowledged that the archive provided the backbone to how the nation imagined "the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry" at home and abroad.[48]

The maintenance and consultation of records of the past (within an "archive" or an otherwise named place) are not unique to the project of nationalism, but the archive as

[47] "This failure to appreciate the weight of the past makes itself apparent by the conspicuous absence of either a national archive or a public library which specializes in such information." Umam Documentation and Research, "About Us".
[48] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 163-64.

a sanctified space where such documents exist in order to support and justify the story of a country (or an organization or a person) is intimately bound up with nationalism and the broader project of modernity. In a Benjaminian sense, this global project creates ruptures between the past and the present that imbue ongoing practices with new meaning even as it leaves others untouched by its logic. With the emergence of the national archive, collections of records found a seemingly new purpose telling the story, and therefore justifying the authority, of nation-states. Conventional archives since have taken up this form, serving to endorse the groups with which they are directly or indirectly affiliated.

But as Jacques Derrida first posited in his essay *Archive Fever*, the obsession with such collections of documents that arose with nationalism and continued into the digital age is not just an instrument of the nation-state but "a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."[49] Walter Benjamin also saw a redemptive potential in the search for more from the past. He understood memory and nostalgia as a defense against the often-totalitarian nature of official history. Detailed, compulsive archives also increasingly form a component of personal and institutional histories. What unites all these many different kinds of archives is their focus on tangible accounts of the past and their objective to be consulted as records of note on their subjects. The conventional archive is composed of newspapers and journals, letters and minutes. Whether accessible digitally

[49] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 91.

or physically, its documents come together to tell a story, and its researchers draw out sub-stories within this general narrative that occasionally challenge the way history is understood.

Integral to this work is that the place where these documents are housed – and the corresponding digital catalogue – should look and feel like an archive where researchers and the public alike can come to consult records of the past. While space is limited at Villa Slim, shelves in the archive room bear newspapers organized chronologically in protective bags, along with local and international periodicals. The reading room holds biographies and reference material, and features a large wooden table where documents can be spread out and studied. Audiovisual materials and the equipment used to view them are kept in Monika's separate office on the property. Shelves in other offices on the bottom floor of the house bear still more books and printed material (including multiple copies of the organization's publications). There are even some boxes stored in Maha's office full of objects that Lokman plans to feature in his proposed "archive of things." Whatever other projects Umam D&R seeks to undertake, the space it occupies in the house is first and foremost that of an archive, and in fact most of the work carried out there centers on the organization's perpetual effort to translate documents and increase its somewhat disjointed web presence by expanding the sources it makes available online.


Figure 6 Newspapers to be scanned in the office.[50]

The dusty rooms where the bulk of this collection is housed lend the heavy touch of history to the work done there, a sense of past that creeps into the everyday life of this space through stories told in and about it that then become integral to the narrative of Umam D&R. And together these records and stories, under the heading of "archive," serve conceptually as a rejection of the current moment in Dahiyeh and Lebanon. Their presence in the house is meant to open up the possibility of alternative narratives of the past, just as the house itself does. And like the house, their existence is defined by an

[50] Umam Documentation and Research, "Umam D&R Photos".

experience of nostalgia that signifies feelings of uncertainty and discord in the present and the desire to re(create) a time deemed more stable and meaningful. The collective memories surrounding and constituting the work of the archive can also produce critical narratives when the past "flashes up" and alternative histories (and presents) thus become possible. These memories form a nostalgia at least partly "conscious of itself" along with "a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present" therefore capable of furnishing "a revolutionary stimulus."[51] The possibility to reimagine the present through an engagement with history moves beyond a shared practice of those who work in the house to become a tangible effect of the archive's position, which (ideally) challenges certain assumptions of the past.

[51] Jameson, "Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia," 68.

## IV: Constructing a History

Narratives of Villa Slim – its past, present, and future – swirl around the property so that it is impossible for the space to maintain any sense of anonymity, even day to day. These stories, like most of the stories people tell about themselves and their place in the world, are not inconsequential and are marked by a deep sense of nostalgia – the past existing somehow in the present. Collectively, they serve to justify Umam D&R's cultural interventions even as they draw in few people from the surrounding area for which this historic house should have the most appeal. The number of guests who visit the house itself (as opposed to The Hangar, the exhibition space located next door that I will discuss in the following chapter) is relatively small, but the space still looms large in the project of history production that the organization undertakes and its intentions in doing so.

In addition to these stories of the compound, the archive that is housed there contains its own underlying logic that further supports the organization's right to influence history and memories in Lebanon, and therefore its right to exist. The space is thus twice imbued with history: once as an old, traditional house that has witnessed the changes of time and again as a place where accounts of the recent past are housed and maintained for posterity. And, as with most archives, this closeness to history, to the "facts" of history, gives Umam D&R authority in the present. That the organization, in its approach and its manners, does not fit within the surrounding milieu becomes inconsequential to a place where history is written and kept. It is a place where history is

constructed and where accounts of the past become facts that elicit feelings of nostalgia in the present.

But beyond the authority to engage history (with the possibility of remaking it), the work of the archive and the way the house acts as a symbol of this work is grounded in a certain nostalgia that makes such interventions feasible. More than a longing for the Lebanon of the past, the nostalgia of those that work in the Villa Slim compound creates a way of living the past in the present that opens the possibility of resisting totalizing narratives both of history and of place. This nostalgia, however, is specific to the context of the house and its relations to its surroundings. The portrayal of the house as historically unique directly and indirectly in the stories of Umam D&R's staff is part of a process of nostalgia that reimagines the house's role in the present, much as the archive reimagines history in contemporary Lebanon as more reflective of disparate experiences. Without the former, the latter approach would not exist in the same form.

Whether it is one narrative of the house or multiple narratives of the Lebanese civil war, there are always stories that are not told. Through its claims to inclusivity in its engagement with history and memory, and reinforced by a sense of marginalization in the area, Umam D&R positions itself to make claims of fair treatment and equality. But these claims, much like the house itself, are founded on values inherited from the French education system in Lebanon and the twentieth century mercantile class – liberal secularism – which are not without exclusionary practices. In what follows, I will address the organization's exhibition space, The Hangar, and a particular exhibition held there

that focused on Dahiyeh, as well as its resemblance to the work of another another figure on the Lebanese art scene, in order to highlight the contrasts between the organization and that of the surrounding area.

# CHAPTER TWO: THE HANGAR

## I: Room for Questions

In 2003, Monika and Lokman began working together as part of the Umam Productions group on a documentary about the Sabra and Shatila massacre that occurred in September 1982. The film was to be comprised of interviews with six former Christian *Kataeb* ("Phalange") Party-affiliated militiamen, part of the group responsible for carrying out attacks on the Palestinian camps that left between 700 to 3,500 dead, mostly women, children, and elderly men.[52] Because of the contentious nature of their subject, they began collecting sources to corroborate the men's accounts. This experience of compiling background material for the film, combined with the fact that Lokman and his family had also built up their own private library of publications and documents over the course of several decades, led them to establish the Umam Documentation and Research archive.

But, as Lokman and Monika tell it, this is only half of Umam D&R's story. The aim of amassing such a collection was not only to ensure there would be source material to support their first documentary film but also for future cultural projects that might similarly reimagine or disrupt conventional historical narratives. In 2004, after the completion of their documentary, they began the process of establishing an officially recognized non-governmental organization in Lebanon, to be called Umam

[52] Determining the exact number of those killed over the three days may never be possible as most were buried in mass graves immediately following and there has been little political interest in investigating. "The Sabra and Shatila Massacre," http://imeu.org/article/the-sabra-shatila-massacre.

Documentation and Research. In conversations with friends and colleagues following initial private screenings of their film, Monika and Lokman found themselves witnessing what Lokman called "a shared questioning, a feeling, on a personal level as well as on a general level, that something was finishing in this country, that something new might emerge." The aim, then, was to launch a formal venture through which projects like the film *Massaker* (Massacre) could receive institutional support and a wider audience in order to capitalize on this feeling of transition and change in the public register. Umam D&R was established as a place where heretofore taboo or divisive questions of Lebanon's national history could not only be studied, but also engaged with in conceptual, creative, and, ultimately, political ways.

Even after Umam D&R was granted NGO status by the government, the state of affairs in Lebanon still made it difficult for Monika and Lokman to find an audience for their first documentary effort. *Massaker* was featured at film festivals across Europe and received a wide release in France and Greece. That it is referred to by those at Umam D&R and in the press in the German spelling (*Massaker*), as opposed to a language more widely understood in Lebanon such as Arabic (*mathbaha)* or French (*massacre*), reveals that it was perhaps largely intended for a diverse, international audience. Nonetheless, Lokman and Monika still attempted to have the film shown in Lebanon. But due to the controversial subject of the film and its subsequent censorship, it was only screened once in its country of origin in 2005 as part of a months-long event hosted by Umam D&R titled "Civil Violence and War Memories." The project also included several other

screenings and exhibitions and two public roundtables, many of which took place in 2005 and 2006 at Umam D&R's exhibition space, The Hangar.[53]

The Hangar, a former storage warehouse made of cement with a corrugated metal roof, is located just next to Villa Slim, but separated from it by the compound's tall, imposing walls. Once a storage facility used to house fresh fruit and vegetables for export, the building had been vacant for almost a decade before Umam D&R began using it for their projects, retaining the name for it used by those in the area. Providing an essentially blank slate for the organization still within sight of the grand, historic family home, the space was envisioned as an entry point through which visitors would not only engage with Umam D&R's mission, but also the surrounding neighborhood. As Maha put it, Monika and Lokman always wanted The Hangar "to put Umam D&R, and the Dahiyeh, on the map of the artistic and cultural spaces in Lebanon."[54]

This chapter addresses the implications of such a project. It traces the way Umam D&R's exhibition space, The Hangar, is positioned as a significant building in the neighborhood through narratives that draw on different, but ultimately similar, constructions of history from the stories told about Villa Slim. As such, it engages the organization's place in the contemporary art milieu that has emerged in Lebanon since the end of the country's civil war. Through a brief analysis of the turn toward documentary and archival practices of prominent Lebanese artistic and cultural hubs, and the implications of this for the development of Umam D&R, The Hangar's place on the

[53] Borgmann, M. 2015.
[54] Maha, 2015.

map that Maha referred to will become clearer. As noted on the space's Facebook page, "The HANGAR in its very built form as well as mission is an extension of UMAM D&R's efforts to come to terms with Lebanon's war-torn past."[55] By addressing the myriad forms and functions the warehouse has taken on in the ten years of its use by Umam D&R, I will shed light on the ways collective memories and stories get re-presented in the form of cultural NGOs working in the domain of contemporary visual arts supported by a host of international funders, as well as The Hangar's unique place among them.

[55] Umam Documentation and Research, "The Hangar," https://www.facebook.com/TheHangar/.

## II: From Storage Space to Exhibition Space

In a pamphlet created to explain the story of The Hangar's evolution from a nondescript storage structure to a well-designed gallery space, the building is described by Umam D&R as "a vibrant artistic and cultural platform," that represents "an effort to resuscitate the tranquil, pluralistic spirit that once motivated its neighborhood, without ignoring the real transformations that have occurred in Dahiyeh over time."[56] This use of the word "platform" hints at the organization's conceptual imagining of the structure as a blank slate. But the existence of such a pamphlet, which traces the history of the building from its construction and use as a warehouse to its renovation following severe structural damage during Israel's 2006 war with Lebanon and beyond, also shows that Umam D&R seeks to firmly ground The Hangar in the surrounding neighborhood and its past.

Unlike Villa Slim, The Hangar's history from its earliest days is well documented. According to Umam D&R's records, based on papers received from the municipality of Haret Hreik as well as memories of those who grew up in the house next door,

> The Hangar was built in the mid-1950s on property number 155. … Originally, the Abela Family used it to house part of its business, which included the purchase of vegetables and fruits and their preparation for distribution. The highest quality produce was exported to neighboring countries, and what remained was sold locally. The building continued to be used for this purpose until the end of the 1960s when the family decided to move its business closer to Beirut International Airport.[57]

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[56] "The Hangar," ed. Umam Documentation and Research (Beirut).
[57] Ibid.

Already a story emerges around The Hangar, tying it to transnational networks as well as local experience. In another account, the warehouse is described as located in the "popular southern suburb" and "busy" throughout the 1960s, implying that international trade was leaving its mark on the area and likely providing jobs for those from the neighborhood.[58] Already in this brief account given by the organization – presented through a sleek webpage and tasteful brochures likely intended to impress potential donors – the space is subtly constructed as a local landmark. The logic behind the name also underscores this image – "The Hangar" is what those in the neighborhood have called the structure since its earliest incarnation.[59]

[58] "The Hangar Story," http://www.umam-dr.org/hangarStory.php?hangarLocation=story.
[59] "Since its construction, the space had been known in the quarter as "The Hangar," and UMAM [D&R] chose to retain that name when it became the building's newest tenant." Ibid.

Figure 7 The Hangar before its initial renovation in 2004.[60]

Initially, with little money to spare after Umam D&R took control of The Hangar and invested in renovations in 2004, the organization simply focused on hosting events such as film screenings and workshops in the space.[61] According to Lokman, "there was all the time activity, there was [*sic*] all the time people coming and going. So the fact that the activity didn't stop, I think, confirmed the place of Umam D&R."[62] Several early events drew in those from the surrounding area, including a photography workshop for Lebanese and Palestinian children from the nearby Palestinian camp of Burj al-Barajneh, but The Hangar largely remained a small venue frequented by those with direct connection to Umam D&R or the material being presented. Though the tone was set

[60] "The Hangar Photos," https://www.facebook.com/TheHangar/photos?ref=page_internal.
[61] "The Hangar."
[62] Slim, L. 2015.

already in 2004, the range of activities remained small – mostly consisting of film screenings and photography or documentary exhibitions – until the space was damaged, leaving only the frame of the building intact, and then rebuilt following the 2006 war.

The organization's relative anonymity in the neighborhood meant that it functioned as an isolated space with little direct local outreach in its early days. Though Maha was not involved with the organization then, she said that it was during this time Lokman and Monika first started serving alcohol at their events – a practice that would later serve as a point of contention for Umam D&R's critics and, more commonly, of pride for the organization.[63] Speaking of the intention behind the act of serving wine at The Hangar, Maha said:

> He [Lokman] was doing it [offering alcohol to guests] in The Hangar, where it is a private space where no one can control what you can show, what you can offer, and what you can do. It's something more of a private place actually. So Lokman wanted the people to know, whenever you say Dahiyeh, it's not only a space where you have cultural spaces of Hezbollah. … No, it's somewhere where you can find contemporary art, where you have a screening about the Lebanese Civil War, where you can see more about what happened. He wanted it to be a public space, an open public space where there's no taboo, where you can read about anything and watch anything you want and you can of course do anything you want … including having wine.[64]

While serving alcohol in a part of town that is marked outwardly by conservatism would generally be frowned upon, since its first events, the organization has used this practice to send a message about the type of work carried out there. It has maintained the image of

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[63] Deeb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*, 232.
[64] Maha, 2015.

an environment where history can be engaged in cosmopolitan, abstract, and artistic ways – even as it still sought to ground its exhibition space in the local fabric of experience through narratives about the significance of The Hangar within the neighborhood's history.[65]

Figure 8 Guests drinking wine at an event at The Hangar.[66]

Over 2005 and 2006, the number of events – mostly exhibitions and film screenings – hosted at The Hangar grew slowly but steadily. Lokman credits these early occasions with establishing the The Hangar as "the place of Umam [D&R]" for those

[65] It should be noted that, as is described in detail in Chapter One, such "cosmopolitan" practices are ultimately linked to the bourgeois socio-economic class of which the Slim family is a part.
[66] Umam Documentation and Research, "The Hangar Photos".

interested in the organization's work. He explained that "it wasn't something weird just happening there and it became part of a certain memory," adding, "No, there was all the time activity, there was all the time people coming and going. So the fact that the activity didn't stop, I think, made it, confirmed the place." Monika, too, cited these small, frequent events early on as helping to build The Hangar's reputation, mostly for those outside the neighborhood: "We were very small … money-wise, I mean, it was just the beginning. And we stayed a little bit on this level, I would say, until the war of 2006, meaning that each month we got a little bit bigger, each month we got a little more funding, but until the war of 2006, … Umam [D&R] was just busy organizing small events." This story of gradual perseverance portrays The Hangar as a space remained local with a wider reputation built initially on grass-roots engagement with the artistic community outside Dahiyeh who might not otherwise visit the area.

In July of 2006, war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah due to an escalation of border tensions leading to the abduction of two Israeli soldiers into Lebanon by Hezbollah's forces.[67] After a failed rescue attempt, Israel then launched air raids into Lebanon aimed at destroying the country's infrastructure, before initiating a land invasion. Part of the Israeli bombing campaign also targeted Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport and the city's southern suburb, particularly buildings with official connections to Hezbollah (the party's headquarters in Haret Hreik, Al Manar broadcasting company, and Al-Nour radio network, among others) as well as homes of

[67] Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Woodstock; Princeton, N.J;: Princeton University Press, 2009), 135.

known party leaders.[68] Later, Amnesty International would use satellite imagery to estimate that "50 multi-story buildings in Beirut containing at least 4,000 apartments" had been destroyed in the month of fighting.[69] While it was not hit directly, despite it's proximity to important Hezbollah sites, Villa Slim and The Hangar suffered extensive damage. As Monika explained, "There was a building just behind there [the back wall of Villa Slim], which was bombarded, so everything was destroyed. … The Hangar, was just a standing structure, it was opened from the pressure. We had no door – we have thousands of photos showing this – also from the pressure."[70] While no one was injured from the blast, the damage suffered by both of Umam D&R's structures proved to be a turning point for the organization.

Following the war, Umam D&R received a Cultural Emergency Response grant from the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, a Dutch foundation under the umbrella of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[71] Ostensibly, the money, which totaled €24,800 or around $34,000 at the time, was to be used for the restoration of The Hangar's roof and the initiation of the archive's digitalization.[72] As Monika noted, this was the first time Umam D&R had received funding for the digitization process – a project that had been discussed but was not a priority until the collection sustained damage. "We wanted to do it before but we had no time, we had no money," she said,

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[68] Ibid.
[69] "Lebanon," http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/science-for-human-rights/lebanon.
[70] Borgmann, M. 2015.
[71] "Prince Claus Fund for Cultre and Development," http://www.princeclausfund.org/.
[72] Ibid.

"So this process really started after the war, and we rebuilt The Hangar. This was one of the consequences." In this way, the extensive destruction in Dahiyeh initially served to attract more large-scale foreign funding to the small cultural NGO, constituting another significant chapter in the structure's origin story as told later by Umam D&R.

The war, along with its aftermath, also attracted more people in Lebanon to Umam D&R and its project. Throughout the conflict, footage of the destruction wrought on the population of southern Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburb, as well as other areas of Lebanon, dominated the news cycle in the country, and eventually the Lebanese Army was brought in to manage the ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the south. Though the 2006 war affected the greater Lebanese populace and not only Hezbollah and the Shi'a population they represent, it was widely acknowledged that this segment of society had been hardest hit. Although some in the country would argue that the bulk of the fighting occurred strictly between Israel and Hezbollah, in general the extreme violence collapsed certain barriers and created a renewed sense of national unity between the areas that suffered the most damage and other communities in Lebanon, which also suffered significant losses due to Israel's bombings. Following the reconstruction of The Hangar in April 2007, Umam D&R was able to capitalize on widespread interest in what had happened to Dahiyeh and draw in more people from central Beirut, as well as the surrounding area.

## III: Collecting and Reconstructing Dahiyeh

The first exhibition held in the space, the content of which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, sought to address the history of Dahiyeh and its populace while simultaneously offering local citizens a platform through which they could share their own stories, all in an attempt to offer a more nuanced picture of the area than its reputation as "Hezbollah's stronghold" would suggest. "Collecting Dahiyeh," as it was titled, was meant to establish the refurbished Hangar as a cultural space still "on the map" for those in Beirut's art community but also as a place with historic and current connections to the surrounding neighborhood. Again, Monika explained the decision as being influenced by the specific space and time: "Then [following the building's reconstruction], there was of course the question, to reopen The Hangar with what? And, on the one hand, we didn't want to neglect where we are. At the same time, we didn't want to do something just about the war."[73] "Collecting Dahiyeh" can be seen as a response to broader interest in Dahiyeh and the neighborhood's significance to the rest of Lebanon following the war, but it also marked a shift in The Hangar's mission, which led to more direct involvement with the area through some exhibitions and events.[74]

Since its reconstruction, the damage that The Hangar had suffered during the war became a key part of the space's narrative. It is frequently cited in Umam D&R's

[73] Borgmann, M. 2015.

[74] Lokman and Monika emphasized that events meant to attract members of the community had been held at The Hangar, both citing the example of World Cup match screenings in 2010.

publications as a milestone in the building's history. On its website, half of the entry titled "The Hangar Story" is devoted to the effects the conflict had:

> On July 12, 2006, the outbreak of war prompted cancellation of the projects and events scheduled to take place in The Hangar. During its coverage of the ongoing violence, Lebanese media reported at about 4:30 pm on Sunday, August 6th of that year that Israeli aircraft [sic] had bombed Haret Hreik for the umpteenth time. Back then, there was nothing particularly remarkable about such news since bombing raids of Beirut's southern suburbs, particularly Haret Hreik. Indeed, since the war's beginning, aerial bombing of that area seemed an almost daily exercise for the Israeli pilots. That August 6th, however, a building located just 100 meters behind The Hangar and UMAM [D&R]'s offices was attacked. Thankfully, while The Hangar suffered only material damage, it nevertheless required months of repair and prompted the mourning of numerous documents that had been destroyed.[75]

In this way, the building serves as a physical reminder of the war and its aftermath – particularly the consequences it had for the neighborhoods that make up Dahiyeh. Reconstruction was not unique to The Hangar; Hezbollah began rebuilding many of the private structures that were destroyed through its Waad Foundation in 2007.[76] By privileging the story of its damage in formal narratives about the space, those at Umam D&R not only highlighted the toll the war had on The Hangar, but also embedded it in the shared experience of this violence, even as the building remained distinct from the local milieu due to the often elite nature of its events and practices (such as serving alcohol).

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[75] This damage also led the organization to move some of its more delicate material, such as films and photographs, to a space in the Beirut neighborhood of Badaro. Umam Documentation and Research, "The Hangar Story".

[76] Bassem Mroue, "Hezbollah Rebuilds South Beirut," *The Washington Post*, November 18 2007.

An additional layer of The Hangar's image emerges from the rhetoric surrounding another renovation project carried out in the space in 2010.[77] This effort, made possible by "a generous grant by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs," saw the entryway to what had before been one large, blank space redefined to include a small library and office, as well as space for a bar.[78] In its literature on the exhibition hall, Umam D&R presents an extensive list of facilities to be made available through this renovation, including "computer stations with access to UMAM Collection and Memory at Work" and "a boutique with UMAM D&R publications and DVDs," as well as a "Concept Cafeteria (in the works)." From this description, it is possible to imagine that The Hangar has morphed from a small exhibition space in a former warehouse to a full-fledged research institute. This model will be explored more in the following section of this chapter, which deals with specific projects carried out in the space and their relationship to other artistic and cultural centers in Beirut, but even without addressing the residency programs and conceptual works exhibited there, it is clear that The Hangar aspires to be an influential presence among the country's art scene.

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[77] "The Hangar – Beirut," http://www.avatar-architettura.it/index.php?portfolio=projects*architecture*07_hangar_beirut.
[78] Umam Documentation and Research, "The Hangar Story".

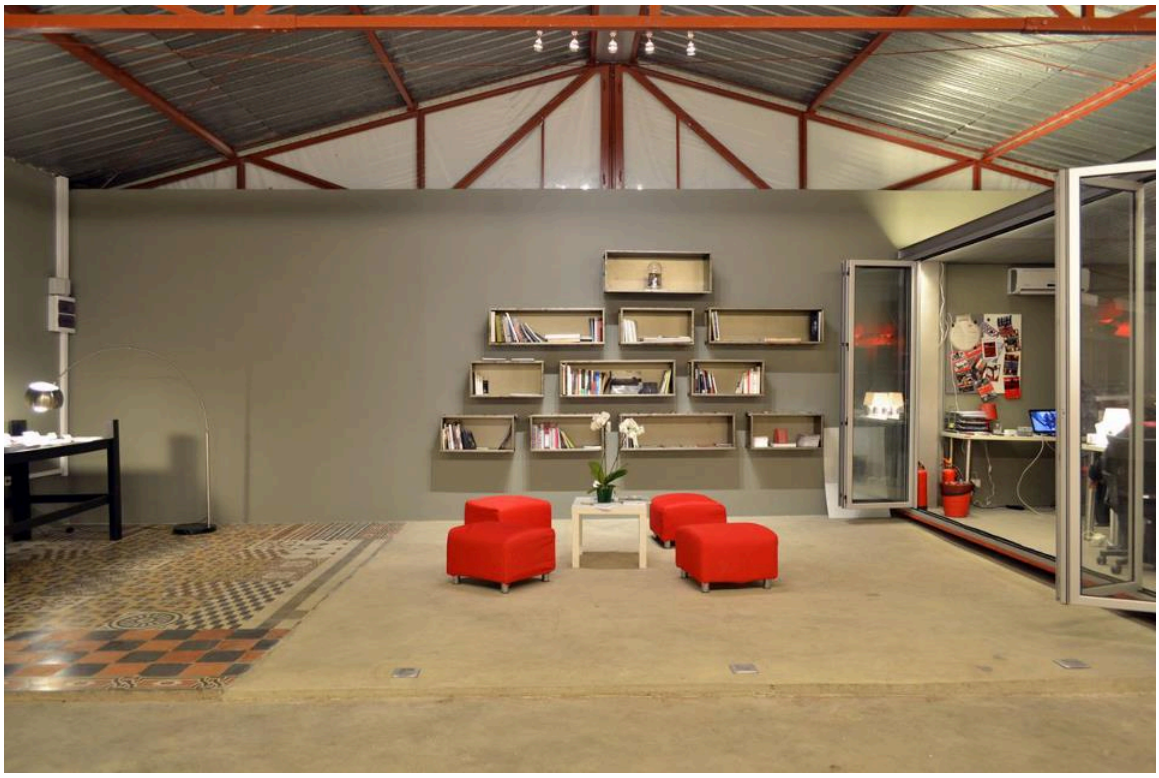

Figure 9 The Hangar following its renovation in 2010.[79]

The Hangar is consciously constructed as both a protected place for creative, conceptual approaches to history and conflict (gallery-like layout and facilities, funding from foreign donors, alcohol served at events), but also deeply grounded in local memory and the community that produced it (becoming "just a place where these things happen," the relationship to the history of the neighborhood, the shared experience of the bombing). This sentiment is given voice again in Umam D&R's official pamphlet promoting The Hangar: "The space reunites the current local population with those who left for the mountains or Beirut's city center during the war years, hosting events such as

[79] "The Hangar Photos".

exhibitions, screenings, workshops, performances and roundtables."[80] Here reference is made to the Christian community that once resided in the neighborhoods of Dahiyeh but was driven out during the Lebanese civil war, particularly following the withdrawal of the Lebanese Forces from south Beirut after their defeat by Harakat Amal's militia in February 1984.[81] While referencing a specific moment in the area's history, this speaks to Umam D&R's broader mission to bring in those from outside the neighborhood as a possible way to challenge what Lara Deeb and Mona Harb have called the "Islamic milieu" of Dahiyeh.[82]

[80] "The Hangar."
[81] During this time, the "green line" divided West Beirut from East Beirut. Kassir, *Beirut*.
[82] Lara; Harb Deeb, Mona, "Culture as History and Landscape: Hizballah's Effort to Shape an Islamic Milieu in Lebanon," *The Arab Studies Journal* 19, no. 1 (2011).

## IV: War-torn Art

In a 2006 exchange between a group of Beirut-based curators addressing the role of art in post-war Lebanon and the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel, Rasha Salti described the intersection of representation and collective memory engaged by artists such as Walid Raad (who will receive further attention in Chapter Three) as an ongoing process, in flux throughout Lebanese society. She wrote:

> In Lebanon, as in many other societies where an official narrative was never able to prevail, where everything pertaining to the "nation" (its history, present and future) has always been subject to contestation, there is an acute awareness of the fictional potentialities in construction and interpretation of fact. … The ideological presentation of fact, evidence, logic, and strategy was reformulated, reshaped, altered. I cannot say it was "reclaimed," but it was "reappropriated" – in some sense contested – however, not to the point of subversion or counterrepresentation.[83]

If the Umam D&R archive housed in Villa Slim serves as a historic foundation for the organization and its project, instilling the work it undertakes with the force of historical fact, The Hangar is the space where "fictional potentialities" and "interpretations of fact" that arise from the contestation of the nation are addressed through artistic and cultural interventions with the hope of arriving at some definite answer. It is a space of possibility where fixed narratives can be challenged and stories reworked to fit needs for an audience, funding, and legitimacy but where an overarching political orientation remains. In this way, Umam D&R – by way of The Hangar – seeks to partake in a broader

[83] Sandra Dagher et al., "Curating Beirut: A Conversation on the Politics of Representation," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (2007): 102.

movement of history-centered artistic projects and foundations in Lebanon that have emerged since the civil war.

The artistic turn toward documentary media by some Lebanese artists following the end of the civil war was accompanied by the rise of a handful of organizations seeking to present and partake in the openings such works created.[84] Among these were non-profit organizations Ashkal Alwan (the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts), a visual culture platform founded by curator Christine Tohme that first began working in 1993, and the Arab Image Foundation, a photography archive established in 1997. Both institutions feature a range of resources at their headquarters, including libraries, public spaces, galleries, and even a cafeteria at Ashkal Alwan. While neither are located in the Hamra district of central Beirut, both represent landmarks on the art and culture "map" to which Maha referred in her statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Such landmarks were produced by certain structures of local cultural production and international funding that have had lasting effects on the work done there, as well as that of Umam D&R and The Hangar.

Hanan Toukan has argued in her work on this period in Lebanese art that "what began as an organic initiative in Lebanon weaving its own alternative infrastructure of cultural production in order to house itself evolved into the mainstream at the same time that civil society took its neo-liberal turn." Her analysis challenges the presentation of

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[84] For a more thorough treatment of post-war art in Lebanon, see "Curating Beirut" and Hanan Toukan, "On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production," *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (2010).

politically engaged, conceptual work in Lebanon as subversive, "other" art. She in turn highlights the rise of international funding for the collaborative institutions that offer such works homes, the major actors on Beirut's art scene. Toukan traces the emergence and development of "supporting local organizations that came to represent the Lebanese post-war generation," at a time when most other industries in Lebanon were being privatized under the direction of then-Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. She then asserts that "such open platforms, and specifically Ashkal Alwan's dynamic fora on cultural practices which host international, regional, and local lectures, panel discussions, video screenings, exhibitions, performances, and book launches, helped secure the place of the organization and the artists associated with it at the international level." [85]

Like the organizations Toukan describes, Umam D&R benefitted greatly from the same influx of funding that contemporary art organizations in Lebanon received, particularly after the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2005 following massive demonstrations in downtown Beirut after the assassination of Rafic Hariri. As has been noted, Monika and Lokman both spoke of an "openness" at this particular moment that encouraged and enabled them to expand their scope. In fact, Toukan identifies the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, along with organizations such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute of George Soros, as a key international funder

[85] Ibid., 141. The "fora" Toukan refers to is Ashkal Alwan's "Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices," a multidisciplinary conference that began in 2002 and has since taken place in every two or three years, depending on funding and the security situation.

of arts institutions in Lebanon from 2005 on.[86] Engagement with this scene, both through some of the conceptual, largely photographic work presented in the space as well as the transnational network it participated in by way of its funders, enabled those at Umam D&R to portray The Hangar as "another, let's say, *mustaqil*, independent cultural space – this one in Dahiyeh – where you can display whatever you want even if it was against the beliefs of Hezbollah."[87]

The perceived independence of such organizations, and the subsequent role they could play in shaping younger generations through cultural engagement, drew international donors to these NGOs. Toukan argues that this change came in line with increased interest on behalf of Western governments in promoting cross-cultural dialogue and understanding between the "Middle East and the Western world in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks," and was influenced by the 2002-09 UN-sponsored Arab Human Development Reports' calls for increased democracy and freedom in the region as well as "the international community's increased interest in promoting its own version of democratization in the Middle East."[88] Whatever the initial cause, civil society in Lebanon and the Middle East more broadly has seen more capital from investors affiliated directly or indirectly with foreign governments in the promotion of cultural and arts organizations as sites of "post-nationalist, post-socialist, and anti-Islamist ideals."[89]

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[86] Ibid., 142.
[87] Maha, 2015.
[88] Toukan, "On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production," 138-42.
[89] Ibid., 142.

While in the case of organizations such as Ashkal Alwan and the Beirut Art Center gallery established in 2009, the aim of such support appears to enable open spaces for discourse through cultural and artistic programs, Umam D&R, which engages directly in political discourse and seeks to appeal to policymakers through its work (as evidenced by efforts to involve them in some events), take this one step further.

While Umam D&R, through its exhibition and events space The Hangar, has been influenced by, and, in some ways, emulated other, more well-established arts platforms in Beirut, it has remained somewhat distinct from these institutions because it has hosted more directly political workshops and lectures in its space as well. Particularly after 2006, the number of large-scale, multidisciplinary events, as well as debate nights and lectures presented at The Hangar, increased. These events and the way those at the organization presented them speak to the desire of Lokman, Monika, and others involved not just to document and critique but also to enact outright change in the narrative surrounding Lebanon's contemporary history. The Hangar as a space, therefore, provides a "platform" not just for artistic and cultural intervention but also for expressions of civic engagement that go beyond the realm of the conceptual. Indeed, with their larger undertakings during this time, the organization looked outside The Hangar to other platforms, but with the same goal of presenting conceptual documentary work that would trigger a debate with a potentially political outcome. While the effects of such projects are difficult to gage in the context of Lebanese politics, that they happened and appear to

have been widely attended, as well as cited as fundamentally significant by those at Umam D&R, complicates the image of The Hangar.

Lokman and Monika identified a handful of events held at The Hangar as particularly representative of Umam D&R's mission following the drastic increase in funding received by the organization from 2006 onward. Inspired by their first major project, "Civil Violence and War Memories," which featured film screenings and roundtable discussions focusing on the Lebanese civil war held throughout 2005 at both The Hangar and the newly reopened Masrah al-Medina (City Theater) in Hamra, many of the undertakings the founders discussed were similarly multidisciplinary endeavors that addressed aspects of the past with particular political implications. Unlike with other arts-focused organizations in Beirut, these projects often resulted in extensive publications, with summaries of what was discussed throughout sessions held at The Hangar and elsewhere and recommendations for future engagements directed at policy-makers. While they considered some projects and events influential for personal reasons, a series of discussions and accompanying exhibitions that began in 2008 and ran for several years were frequently held up by the founders as the most significant project carried out in the space, and beyond, to date.

The long-term project "Missing," an exhibition featuring photographs of those disappeared during the Lebanese civil war, coincided with another event series titled "What is to Be Done? Lebanon's War-Loaded Memory," which featured eight workshops focusing on transitional justice in the aftermath of conflict. Begun in April 2008, Monika

explained that these workshops were an effort to bring together "a lot of people who normally don't talk to each other."[90] The first exhibition of the "Missing" series, which would later be shown in five other venues across the country, was also presented on the occasion of the first lecture and round-table discussion. While this event was held at the larger UNESCO Palace cultural center – thanks to a wide range of support from international sponsors including the German Federal Foreign Office and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation as well as a partnership with the International Center for Transitional Justice – subsequent film screenings and discussions were held at The Hangar, and workshops throughout Lebanon followed. As the eyes of some 500 people (later 800) whose stories were largely still unknown looked on, an initially small group of "civil society activists and academics" met to talk about "Lebanon's war-loaded memory, as a common history that has gathered some [people] and separated others."[91] Another seven such meetings and 16 corresponding exhibitions and film screenings occurred, and Umam D&R published periodic newsletters with summaries drawn from minutes taken throughout each event.[92]

Monika admitted that the first several meetings attracted few participants, but she contended that as knowledge of the sessions spread, more and more people were drawn to Umam D&R's events and The Hangar:

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[90] Borgmann, M. 2015.
[91] Umam Documentation and Research, "What Is to Be Done?," http://www.umam-dr.org/projectInfo.php?projectId=35&location=projectInfo&fromTab=pastProjects.
[92] Borgmann, M. 2015.

> And I think this was one of the best projects because we invited also the army, we invited the ISF [Internal Security Forces], we invited artists, we invited the political parties, and we invited researchers. … And this didn't function in the beginning. I mean, in the beginning, in the first workshop, we had more or less the civil society and some researchers. But the army and the ISF and all the political parties, they started to come from the third workshop on. And then they came each time.[93]

The combination of photography exhibition and civic roundtable occurring both at The Hangar and around Lebanon with funding from international donors is reminiscent of the model shared by other contemporary visual culture institutions, particularly following the influx of neoliberal capital. In the case of Umam D&R and The Hangar, however, the intended audience and the direction of discussion, as well as the pamphlets and books produced following these events, highlights the directly political aims of the organization, "guided by a rejection of political manipulation of the past and the constant threat of renewed violence."[94] The Hangar, along with Umam D&R events held elsewhere but following the same model, served as a platform for conceptual exhibitions and discussions. Beyond this, however, there is an implicit understanding that these concepts are addressed with the intention to effect real change.

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[93] Ibid.

[94] "Confronting Memories: Explorations in Film," in *What Is to Be Done?*, ed. Umam Documentation and Research (Beirut2008).

## V: On Hold

Unlike Villa Slim with its seemingly grandiose pedigree, The Hangar as a space is not unique. Efforts to engage with its history and salvage a place-specific narrative that can be linked to Umam D&R's story, therefore, reflect the organization's attempt to ground all that they do in a concept of historicity. In the case of The Hangar, this serves two purposes: first, to provide validation for the space's current imagining within the local milieu – it is of and in Dahiyeh – and second, to legitimate the work done there by incorporating it into a historic present. More than this, The Hangar as a physical space enables the organization to connect with a larger network of international funders and artistic and cultural producers.

If The Hangar, and the subsequent projects that emerged from it, provided a platform from which Lokman, Monika, and others at Umam D&R could engage directly with politics and a political audience, what was the overall impact of these events? Lokman measures the organization's success by the number of people they drew in: "Let's say that there are two criteria. If we are talking about, let's say, popular success, obviously the activities that we organized at the Hangar, or I mean, some of them were more successful. Each time we broke a taboo, we were more successful." Lokman's interest in breaking taboos highlights the role that international sponsors feel such organizations can potentially play in the Middle East, and Lebanon specifically. But due to political limitations, particularly since the war began in neighboring Syria in 2011, it is difficult to discern any measurable trends in Lebanon that have resulted from such

political discourse in the realms of visual culture. Instead, the very act of this discourse falls under the umbrella of democratization in a broader, ideological sense.

In the case of The Hangar, its location plays a significant role, as does Umam D&R's broader goal to encourage alternative narratives of Lebanon's civil conflict. Despite claims of inclusivity, the organization's efforts "to resuscitate the [imagined] tranquil, pluralistic spirit that once motivated its neighborhood" often led to direct and indirect antagonism of Hezbollah and the constituents they represented in the area. That such an institution existed in the heart of "Hezbollah's stronghold" as Dahiyeh is often known, presented a unique opportunity for outside forces that wished to undermine the party's dominance in the region.[95] Both within Lebanon generally and Beirut specifically, Umam D&R and its exhibition platform seemed an ideal match for international financial and technical support. But as tension caused by the war next door began to rise in Lebanon, beginning around 2012 and escalating with the series of bombings in 2013 and 2014, funding has become more difficult as few major events have been carried out at The Hangar.

As the security situation has become more critical, much of Umam D&R's work has been moved outside The Hangar. Since 2012, the organization has organized an exhibition of works completed through an annual residency program it coordinates with the National Socialism Documentation Center in Cologne, Germany, "Art and Archives,"

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[95] Hezbollah's armed wing has been designated as a terrorist organization by both the United States and the majority of country's in the European Union, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm. and James; Rudoren Kanter, Jodi, "European Union Adds Military Wing of Hezbollah to List of Terrorist Organizations," *The New York Times*, July 22 2013.

which allows a handful of Lebanese artists to spend a year in Cologne. The program is facilitated by the Lebanese Ministry of Culture as well as the Culture Commission of the Municipality of Beirut and the German Embassy in Lebanon. Due to the profile of the guests that have attended, beginning in 2013, the works have been displayed at the Ministry of Culture building at the eastern-most end of Hamra instead of at The Hangar in Dahiyeh.[96] Additionally, in late 2012, The Hangar's longtime curator and director Grace, as I would like to call her, was let go, and since this time, The Hangar's website has been inaccessible. The message on the landing page states: "Because of the overall SECURITY SITUATION, particularly conditions in Dahiyeh (Beirut's southern suburbs), activities at The Hangar have been placed ON HOLD TEMPORARILY."[97] The lack of events also indicate a decrease in funding for such work, further revealing the tangible effects the war in Syria has had on Umam D&R.

Even as the number of exhibitions at The Hangar decreases, the question still remains as to what Umam D&R's conceptual engagements, always part of but also somewhat distinct from its explicitly political efforts, seek to *do*. In a little over a decade of existence, Umam D&R has increasingly sponsored projects and exhibitions that engaged with its archival record to produce work that questions the role of history in addressing conflict and creating a Lebanese national narrative. The next chapter will analyze how efforts such as the "Collecting Dahiyeh" exhibition can be compared to the

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[96] Umam Documentation and Research, "Art and Archives Call for Proposals," http://www.umam-dr.org/template.php?id=17.
[97] "The Hangar," www.thehangar-umam.org.

work of a prominent Lebanese figure on the international art scene who also helped to initiate the "documentary turn" in Lebanese contemporary art following the civil war. In so doing, it questions how history not only comes to be imagined in particular spaces, but also produced through archival mediation, documentary formats, and oral lectures and debates.

# CHAPTER THREE: UMAM D&R AND THE ATLAS GROUP

## I: Dahiyeh's History in Progress

In 2007, on the occasion of The Hangar's re-opening, Umam D&R launched its exhibition "Collecting Dahiyeh," which "aimed at documenting the history of the southern suburb of Beirut and its rapid transformation – mainly due to the civil war(s)."[98] On display was a collection of 35 posters featuring photos, maps, and recorded interviews largely conducted with former residents of Dahiyeh who had since migrated to other parts of Beirut. An outline of the area's street grid took up one white wall, with markers available to encourage guests to add to what was titled a "Map in Progress," allowing them to contribute to the construction of the neighborhood. The majority of the posters, however, emphasized Dahiyeh's emergence as a residential center, tracing the development of the area from sparsely populated farmland just outside the provincial Ottoman capital to the urban displacement that occurred because of Lebanon's civil conflicts, including the recent 2006 war with Israel. In particular, many of the interviews were conducted with former Christian residents of the area and sought to shed light on what the neighborhoods of Dahiyeh were like before they became known as "Hezbollah's stronghold" south of Beirut.

[98] "Collecting Dahiyeh," http://www.umam-dr.org/projectInfo.php?projectId=15&location=projectInfo.


Figure 10 Lokman and a guest in front of the "Map in Progress" during the "Collecting Dahiyeh" opening.[99]

When asked whether or not he thought "Collecting Dahiyeh" was able to successfully present a more nuanced history of Dahiyeh, Lokman stated, "I think that finally, when you stand in front of your mirror, you accept a different image than the mental one that you have of yourself. … The idea of mirroring Dahiyeh through narratives, pictures, testimonies, was also to show how much elements are hidden, I would say under the generic perception, self-perception, of the ghetto."[100] The mirror becomes active in the present, revealing not only parts of Dahiyeh's past that were

[99] "The Hangar Photos".
[100] Slim, L. 2015.

previously unknown but also aspects of its present that often get overlooked in favor of a homogenized image. The goal, therefore, was to challenge the common perception of Dahiyeh in the past and even in the present.

But in comments made to the press upon the exhibition's opening and reflecting on it privately ten years later, Lokman was quick to refute accusations that the material on display was merely proof of a romanticized longing for the past. At the time of the exhibition, an article in The Daily Star newspaper contended that Lokman's "strong political position" potentially made the show "needlessly provocative" and thus colored "the history Umam will tell."[101] Speaking with the reporter, Jim Quilty, Lokman pushed back against this perception,

> The Dahiyeh is part of my identity. I don't want to fall back on this stupid notion that before the [South Lebanese and Bekaa] migrants came into Haret Hreik everything was much better … It's our responsibility to try to make it better today. I don't need any cultural or artistic camouflage to express my political views. When I want to do that I just write an article. Obviously I have my nostalgic memories of this place, but that's not the point.[102]

As noted in Chapter One, again in the summer of 2015, he refuted apparent criticism from a pro-Hezbollah paper when the project was first launched: "*Al-Akhbar* saw a kind of nostalgia for a world I'm trying to salvage, which wasn't at all my purpose. But yes, this is a perception and I accept various perceptions even though I don't agree with

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[101] Jim Quilty, "Putting Flesh and Bones on the Specter of Dahiyeh," *The Daily Star*, June 8 2007.
[102] Slim, L. 2015. The article to which Lokman refers is titled "Bahathan 'an ('Asama) al-Zaman al-Dahiyeh," which is a play on the exhibitions title in Arabic ("Bahathan 'an al-Dahiyeh") and translates to "In Search of/Collecting (the Capital of) Lost Time." Hussein Bin Hamza, "Bahathan 'an ('Asama) Al-Zaman Al-Dahiyeh," *Al-Akhbar*, May 29 2007.

them."[103] The question still remains as to what an exhibition such as "Collecting Dahiyeh" could achieve through its engagement with this history, and particularly how they could "make it better today."

This chapter seeks to engage with what is most provocative about Umam D&R's projects: the organization's efforts to alter the way history is engaged with and understood in Lebanon. The role of memory and institutional, archival practices in presenting alternative accounts of the past will be explored through a comparison with another significant actor in conceptual debates about the history of the country's civil conflict: Lebanese artist of international renown Walid Raad. His earlier fictive work documenting periods of violence in Lebanon and their aftermath – in many ways strikingly similar to the work carried out by Umam D&R through its archive and exhibition space only a few years later – plays with "power in the production of alternative narratives," which, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, begins with "the joint creating of facts and sources."[104]

Lokman and others at Umam D&R maintained that "Collecting Dahiyeh" was about recovering and preserving certain memories, but they did not deny that, just as with many of their other projects, the show sought to play a tangible role in the production of the area's history, its present, and, ultimately, the way it would be perceived in the future *through* engagement with these memories. Supporting text describing the show highlights

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[103] Quilty, "Putting Flesh and Bones on the Specter of Dahiyeh."
[104] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 29.

the active intervention those involved sought to carry out: "Knowing that such a project could never be exhaustive, UMAM D&R presented the exhibition as a work in progress and as a step towards *conscious remembering* versus continual forgetting."[105] The effort of remembering itself here becomes a deliberate, radical act capable of changing the way present and future experiences are understood. Rather than just memories for memories' sake, as the description of the project appears to indicate, the stories told through the exhibition call for a profound rethinking of Dahiyeh and its narrative that – far from being "needlessly provocative" – is entirely in keeping with Umam D&R's mission to challenge dominant understandings of the past. In this way, it is necessarily provocative.

While the dates Raad gives for his pieces have shifted over time, the works that will be analyzed – part of his "Atlas Group" series – were largely produced between the late 1990s and early 2000s. They continue to be featured in exhibitions around the world to this day, most recently as a component of the first contemporary survey of his career, which was displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City from October 2015 to January 2016. Nonetheless, by the time Lokman and Monika founded Umam D&R in 2004, The Atlas Group project had already been showcased widely in Beirut, the Arab world, Europe, and North America.[106] Lokman and Monika have even cited him as a collaborator in their project.[107] Though the comparison between Raad's Atlas Group and

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[105] Emphasis added. Umam Documentation and Research, "Collecting Dahiyeh".

[106] "The Atlas Group/Walid Raad," http://www.sfeir-semler.com/gallery-artists/the-atlas-group-walid-raad/.

[107] In 2012, The Hangar hosted an event titled "Art Sale Brunch," at which they featured and sold work from 20 artists including Raad. Though there is no record that he attended, Tarek El-Ariss, associate

Umam D&R will be drawn out for the sake of highlighting certain nuances of the common methods both utilize, it is important to note that in many ways Lokman and Monika have attempted to create spaces for exactly the work Raad's pieces seek to accomplish. Key to understanding this comparison, however, is acknowledging the fundamental difference between Raad's self-proclaimed fictive creations and Umam D&R's ultimate goal to engage with narratives founded in fact.

professor of Arabic at the University of Texas, described to me a visit he made around this time to The Hangar with Raad.

## II: An Imagined Collective

For those at Umam D&R who were involved at the time, the "Collecting Dahiyeh" exhibition was particularly significant. Lokman stated that the opening had been largely successful in drawing in crowds of people both from central Beirut and even the immediate vicinity. Monika classified the show as one of The Hangar's "major exhibitions," which helped to set the pace for organization and led to other similar projects: "This inspired others, because, I mean, not only the Dahiyeh had changed, also other quarters changed. And this had inspired others and also ourselves. We later did something about Zokak al-Blatt [a neighborhood in central Beirut] and so on."[108] The audience it brought in was uniquely diverse (despite the fact, or perhaps because, it was seen as challenging Hezbollah in the area), and it served as a model for other work.

The show remained meaningful in the minds of Umam D&R's founders for a number of other reasons too. The exhibition came up frequently in discussions about the organization's past because it had been so popular but also because it had been such a personal effort for Lokman and others working with Umam D&R at the time. Among the reasons that led the organization to undertake the project given, Monika said that first and foremost it was because "of course, Lokman wanted to do it and had the material already."[109] Maha, too, who began working at Umam D&R shortly after the exhibition

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[108] The event to which she refers was the screening of the documentary film *Zokak el-Blat: Memories From a Beiruti Neighborhood*, in which young Lebanese filmmaker Karim al Hakim traces the history migrations in and out of the neighborhood. It was the first effort in what was to be a broader project titled "From the Phoenician Alphabet to the Nahda – Zokak el Blat: Paths and Figures," which to this date has not been pursued. Borgmann, M. 2015.

[109] Ibid.

ended, remarked that much of the assortment of photos and maps came from Lokman's personal collection, which predated Umam D&R's other acquisitions, and that those interviewed were "friends of the family, especially because the mother of Lokman is Christian."[110] While Lokman has sought continually to distance the project from accusations of personal bias, "Collecting Dahiyeh" was nonetheless shaped by his lived experience and the specific milieu of Villa Slim.

A parallel subjective engagement with the past shapes the work of Lebanese artist Walid Raad. Like Lokman, Raad seeks in some ways to distance his art from his personal involvement, albeit to much different ends. In 1999, Raad presented a new project centering on Lebanon's tumultuous past, The Atlas Group, as "an imaginary foundation based in New York and Beirut, established in 1999, whose purpose is to collect, produce, and archive documents of the Lebanese Civil Wars (1975-91)."[111] Since then, Raad has altered the wording of this description slightly in both the group's publications and the public lecture performances in which he introduces audiences to the fictional work of his foundation. At its core, however, the stated aim remains remarkably close to that of Umam D&R: "To preserve, examine, and debate the memories of civil violence as well as to provide a platform for public access to, and exchange of such memories. Ultimately … to shed light on these conflicting memories, analyze them, and evaluate collectively

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[110] Maha, 2015.

[111] Allen Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad," *Bomb* 81, no. Fall (2002), http://bombmagazine.org/article/2504/walid-ra-ad. As Britta Schmitz notes in her essay on Raad, the name may be a reference to the traditional cartographic atlas where "geographic and astronomic facts" are recorded as a "hermetic science that secures knowledge and power.: Today it invokes an ability to survey and classify territory. Walid Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad* (Germany2006), 44.

the shared responsibilities associated with their continued presence."[112] The amount of time between when Raad began pursuing such themes and when Umam D&R took them up was clear: Raad first exhibited his Atlas Group project (1999) long before Lokman and Monika founded Umam D&R (2004). In addition to this, Raad states as his goal to fabricate his alternative history, while Umam D&R seeks to bring to light documented facts and sources of the past that may have otherwise remained undiscussed.

But is this distinction so clear? Raad directly acknowledges in the supporting texts for his exhibitions and begins his lecture performances with a clear declaration that the organization he has created and to which some of the pieces he displays are attributed is an *imaginary* collective. Audiences, however, are often still convinced due to the influence of the documentary media he utilizes and the way he presents the work. Corresponding with Alan Gilbert in 2002, Raad conceded that this was a deliberate way he sought to "play" with the presentation of (false) historic documents:

> But even this direct statement fails, in many instances, to make evident for readers or an audience the imaginary nature of the Atlas Group and its documents. This confirms to me the weighty associations with authority and authenticity of certain modes of address (the lecture, the conference) and display (the white walls of a museum or gallery, vinyl text, the picture frame), modes that I choose to lean on and play with at the same time.[113]

That Raad's work deliberately blurs the line between fact and fiction not only undermines dominant narratives of the Lebanese civil war and its aftermath, it also problematizes the

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[112] Umam Documentation and Research, "About Us".
[113] Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad".

alternative narratives presented by Umam D&R. Raad's art puts on display the making of "facts" from "sources" through methods and media that thus problematize all efforts to produce, or challenge, history.

One way that the art Raad displays under the title of The Atlas Group collective accomplishes this is through its archival qualities. As Jeffrey Wallen has noted in his analysis of The Atlas Group Archives, the works themselves play with the audience's knowledge that "the archive cannot give us direct access to historical truth or to the essence of an ineffable experience" and instead offer "a parody of the drive to gain knowledge through measurement, and a mixing of registers (the handwritten annotation and the newspaper photograph; the picture from a magazine and the personal photograph; the archival commentary and the diary entry)."[114] These works then become "subsumed … into an organized archive" that lacks a conventional, established objective.[115] Instead, as curator Kassandra Nakas argued in her preface to a volume chronicling The Atlas Group's work, the fictive and largely "private" documents that make up this archive highlight "the shortcomings of a historical discourse obsessed with facts, [and] in their sheer resilience against reductive representations, point beyond the momentary," to say nothing of what they suggest of disputed facts[116]

Another method Raad uses to distance himself from the authorship of his archive is the imaginary characters to which he attributes some of The Atlas Group pieces. The

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[114] Wallen Jeffrey, "The Lure of the Archive: The Atlas Project of Walid Raad," *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, no. 2-3 (2011): 287.
[115] Ibid., 291.
[116] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 39.

artist keeps his "sources" straight with a diagram that designates various documents as "Type A (attributed to an identified individual); Type ED (found documents); Type AGP (attributed to The Atlas Group)."[117] One such figure that Raad has constructed to imbue his project with more authority is that of the imaginary Lebanese historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. The story that frequently accompanies documents shown under his name states, "Until his death in 1993, Dr. Fakhouri was the most renowned historian of Lebanon. At the time of his death, and to everyone's surprise, the historian bequeathed hundreds of documents to The Atlas Group for preservation and display."[118] According to the supporting literature, his collection includes 226 notebooks, 24 photographs, and 2 films, only some of which have been shown by Raad. Dr. Fakhouri is not only presented as a reliable source – a "renowned historian" – but also a prolific one, who collected documents and kept records so obsessively over the course of his life that they were able to form the Atlas Group's archive following his death.

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[117] *The Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness Is Dead: Documents from the Fakhouri File in the Atlas Group Archive* (Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004).
[118] Ibid.

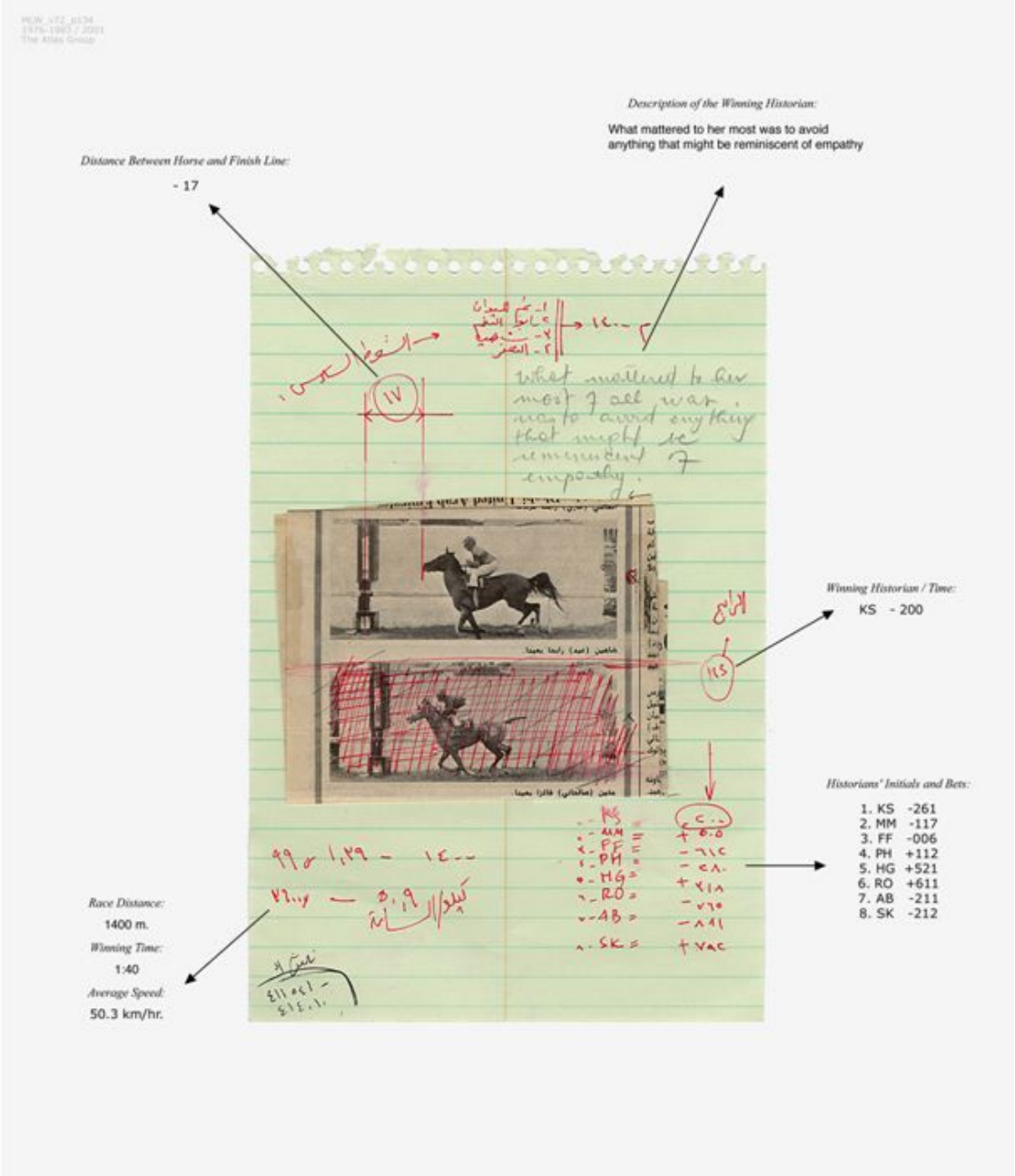


Figure 11 A page from one of Dr. Fadl Fakhouri's notebooks, titled *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars*.[119]

[119] Ibid.

The parallels between Dr. Fakhouri and Lokman are striking. Speaking of the initial trove of documents with which Umam D&R's archive was founded, Monika credited Lokman and his family with having the "sense" to preserve this collection over the years:

> Lokman and his family, they have been collecting since forever because they had a personal interest. They have been collecting documents, all what is called the "gray literature," newspapers, since forever. … I mean, it's a family where everybody is reading, in which all have a sense of political history or social history, so they have been collecting since forever.[120]

Lokman echoed this sentiment, describing his inclination to gather and save material for posterity as something fundamental in his nature. He said, "I don't know how someone becomes a kind of *collectionneur* [collector] or whatever you want to call it. It's something that I did all my life without any notion of why. It is a pleasure." While Lokman preferred the title of collector to historian, his self-professed obsession with the past is key to understanding his role as Umam D&R's outspoken co-director.

This drive to save and store everything, similar to the "archive fever" described by Jacques Derrida, seems to run counter to the power of the archive previously discussed: the ability, as illustrated by such scholars as Benedict Anderson, for a particular collection of documents to define a subject.[121] In this way, archives, and the

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[120] Monika often used the phrase "since forever" when speaking of the past, and particularly with respect to habits of Lokman and the Slim family.

[121] This is addressed more directly in Chapter One, but, as Anderson notes, the dead and forgotten men Michelet exhumed in his research on the French Revolution "were by no means a random assemblage of forgotten, anonymous dead. They were those whose sacrifices, throughout History, made possible the

histories they tell, are defined by what they leave out as much as what they include. But this is not always a conscious goal of those who accumulate enough material to constitute an archive – be it real or fictional. And in the case of Lokman, as with Dr. Fakhouri, the image of the compulsive, natural-born collector serves another purpose: it lends credibility to their respective collections, which become products of their general interest and thus belie no ulterior motives. But, as Nakas notes in her essay on Raad's collection of sources and facts: "As impersonal as the documents preserved in The Atlas Group Archive may seem, defying every possibility of forging identity, in terms of their selection and production, they are nonetheless to be traced back to Walid Raad's own experience."[122] The simultaneously subjective and objective nature of the collections of Lokman and Dr. Fakhouri challenges any effort to easily classify material presented by The Atlas Group or Umam D&R as fact or fiction.

Among the other visual and rhetorical devices that Raad uses to authenticate his archive and its narrative are the documentary media of film and photography. One of the first works presented under the Atlas Project was the video "Hostage: The Bachar Tapes," in which an actor playing fictional Lebanese captive Souheil Bachar describes the period from 1983 to 1993, during which time he was held hostage by "Islamic militants." In 1985, Bachar (the only Arab to be taken by these militants) spent three months with five American hostages who were the most famous victims of Lebanon's

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rupture of 1789 and the self conscious appearance of the French nation." In ways similar to the historic work of Michelet, archives often support a larger narrative of the nation, an individual, etc. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 202.

[122] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 52.

hostage crisis globally.[123] According to the summary that accompanies Bachar's testimony, "In 1999, Bachar collaborated with The Atlas Group (a non-profit cultural research foundation based in Lebanon) to produce 53 videotapes about his captivity. Tapes #17 and #31 are the only two tapes Bachar makes available outside of Lebanon." His account largely focuses on "the cultural, textual, and sexual aspects of his detention with the Americans."[124] Both the tales he tells, with their accounts of homoerotic encounters, and the documentary aesthetic of the video, which features news clips of the American captives and other figures, make for a sensationalized "history" that speaks to a deep-seated curiosity with captivity.

Similarly, several of The Atlas Group's photographic projects blur the line between concrete, factual narratives from Lebanon's civil war(s) and Raad's fiction in ways that play with its audience's desire to *know* the past. These include "Secrets in the Open Sea," a series of 29 photographic prints featuring opaque rectangles in varying shades of blue that were "found buried in the rubble during the 1993 demolition of Beirut's war-ravaged commercial districts." Six of these prints were then sent to Europe to undergo "chemical and digital analysis," at which time small group portraits of individuals who had disappeared or been found dead at sea during the war were discovered hidden within the blue.[125] As Nakas noted in her essay on these images and

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[123] Between 1982 and 1992, at the height of Lebanon's civil war, more than 100 foreigners were taken hostage and eight died in captivity. While no group has claimed responsibility, most believe that testimonies indicate Hezbollah and Hezbollah-affiliated groups were behind the majority of them. For more on this moment in Hezbollah's past, see Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*.
[124] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 90.
[125] Ibid., 104.

others displayed by Raad through The Atlas Group, "Not conveying authenticity but creating awareness, not accumulating knowledge but challenging thought – this is the impetus behind the photographs in The Atlas Group Archive."[126] The photos respond to the audience's desire for answers but ultimately present still more questions as to what these fictive documents *mean*.

In many ways, this is also the aim of Umam D&R's projects, and particularly those that make comparable use of documentary formats. The 2003 film *Massaker*, discussed in Chapter Two, left its audience with no definite way to situate the accounts of violence shared by the six former militants. As art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie pointed out at the time of its release,

> A film, even a documentary with a bent more activist than aesthetic, is an artwork. It may be seductive, convincing, provocative or not. But it cannot confer the status or legitimacy of official postwar reconciliation policies, however barren and suspect those may be. It cannot demand truthful confessions or mete out meaningful consequences. … Does this [the testimonies given in the film] humanize them to such an extent that viewers – neighbors, fellow citizens, victims' families – may learn to forgive them? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe the best 'Massaker' can do is document such talk and hope an audience responds. Otherwise all viewers are left with is despair.[127]

While the film focuses on apparently factual accounts given by these men – as has already been noted, Lokman and Monika described going to extensive lengths to verify their stories – the overall effect as described by Wilson-Goldie is analogous to the

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[126] Ibid., 52.

[127] Kaelen Wilsom-Goldie, "Tackling Postwar Amnesia and Erasure as Cultural Production, 'Massaker' Makes Aesthetic Choices with Political Implications," *The Daily Star*, October 22 2005.

invented tales of Raad and his Atlas Group.[128] Ultimately, it is difficult to place the stories of the men and to identify what is to be done with the understanding of the past they impart.

Similarly, the "Missing" exhibitions, which initially featured around 500 photographs of those who remained missing since the Lebanese civil war, confronts its audience with an abundance of information that is difficult to situate. Accompanying the pictures, which eventually grew to include over 800 individuals, is data on those pictured, with the stated goal to "to reanimate those who have disappeared and tie them to our reality, both as individuals and the proportion of the Lebanese population that remains missing."[129] While in many cases the disappearance of these individuals can be documented, grounding their inclusion in the exhibition in facts, the display does more than just provide documentary evidence about those who vanished during the conflict. By directing the audience to think about the absence of these disappeared Lebanese from their lives, the images speak to the absences inherent in photographic representation, much as Raad's images of the war do.

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[128] In his unpublished dissertation, Mark Ryan Westmoreland described Lebanese artist Jalal Toufic's response to the film, offering another take: "Contrasting this film with the work created by the Lebanese artists attune to the latency of images – that is archivists of the "undead" like Walid Raad, Joanna Hadjithomas, Lamia Joreige, and Ghassan Salhab – Toufic suggests that the filmmakers of Massaker had made it the wrong way. For these theoretical elites, who have grappled most rigorously with the crisis of representing the war, assertions like Toufic invoke another mode of othering. One reporter described it as a club that had some sort of moral authority on how to represent the war and that the *Massaker* filmmakers were not part of it." Mark Ryan Westmoreland, "Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon," Department of Anthropology (University of Texas at Austin, 2008).

[129] *Missing*, (Beirut: Umam Documentation and Research, 2010).

But neither Raad's Atlas Group nor Umam D&R limit their engagement with the past to documents and exhibitions. The "lecture" performances he gives are key to Raad's work. Though he begins his piece with an introductory statement establishing that none of what will follow is founded in fact, Raad spends the majority of the lectures presenting "in a PowerPoint display the same photographic prints, videos, and 8mm short films as so many 'files' archived by The Atlas Group."[130] Corresponding with Gilbert, Raad stated that his presentation style was borne of his experience in academia, both as a doctoral candidate at the University of Rochester and then eventually as a tenured professor at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. He described how elements of the performance had become a sort of standardized act:

> This ongoing, always-in-progress 70-minute lecture/presentation looks and sounds like a college lecture, an academic conference presentation, or an artist talk. I sit behind a rectangular table facing the audience. I show slides and videotapes on a screen to my left. I speak into a microphone. There are a glass of water, a notebook, a pen, and a lamp on the table. I wear a light shirt and dark dress pants. I encounter technical difficulties. I am interrupted by people I have planted in the audience, who also ask questions during the question and answer period. I also answer nonscripted questions.[131]

His delivery, however, is not consistent to the point that it becomes characterless. During one such lecture given in late 2015 as part of the special exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, *New York Times* art critic Holland Cutter described Raad's speech as adopting "a driven, slightly unhinged tension that keeps you confused

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[130] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 61.
[131] Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad".

and on edge."[132] André Lepecki, in an essay on the significance of performance to The Atlas Group's objectives, described Raad's voice in his lectures as adding "a capacity for his images to act, to affect, to activate, and to produce memory as that indispensible critical quality of the present that persists."[133] The tension between the seemingly detached structure of his performance and the deeply personal nature of his work that is revealed through it leads the audience to question the "fiction" in these lectures.

Figure 12 Walid Raad "performing" a lecture.[134]

[132] Holland Cotter, "Walid Raad's Unreality Show Spins Middle Eastern History as Art," *The New York Times*, January 7 2016.
[133] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 65.
[134] Eva Respini, ed. *Walid Raad* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 33.

The "driven, unhinged" voice Raad gives to the documents during these performances carries the weight of his own personal memories that inform them. He noted in correspondence with Nakas how fundamentally particular his own engagement with the past is: "The story one tells oneself that captures one's attention and belief may have nothing to do with what happened in the past, but that's the story that seems to matter in the present."[135] Raad makes these stories manifest, brings them to life through his physical performances. In a less direct way, Umam D&R also emphasizes the significance of verbal exchanges to the sharing of memories through the round table discussions, lectures, and debates that accompany their major exhibitions and projects. The spoken encounters that engage both Lebanese and foreign audiences often take the form of academic-style lectures or looser "debate" nights and "enable people to exchange memories and ideas, both within Lebanon and among other post-conflict societies, in the hope that Lebanon will formulate the plans and strategies necessary to deal with its turbulent past."[136] Umam D&R's varied approach to producing alternative historic narratives, like Raad's, speaks to a concern with the limits of conventional forms of representation and the failure of these forms to register aspects of experience.

The Atlas Group was not Raad's only foray into archive building and history production with implications for understanding Umam D&R's projects. Among other things, in 2002 he collaborated with fellow Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari to curate an exhibition for the Arab Image Foundation (*Fondation Arabe pour l'Image*), of which

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[135] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 52.
[136] Umam Documentation and Research, "About Us".

Raad is a member and Zaatari a co-founder. The AIF seeks to preserve and promote photography in the Middle East, and the current collection includes over 600,000 photos.[137] For their project, titled "Mapping, Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography," Raad and Zaatari presented over 4,000 staged and unstaged photographs of people in the Arab world from the archive that "raise questions about portraiture, performance, photography and identity in general."[138] As art historian Megan Heuer has noted, "Raad and Zaatari probe the narratives that photography can and does construct about public identity in a modern culture defined by nation-states, cities, consumption, and movement." But she ultimately argues, "The exhibition itself slides away from the articulation of coherent and unified meaning into a more elusive and poetical mode." [139] Nakas has argued that The Atlas Group "in its fictive character, represents to a certain extent a counter-archive to the FAI [AIF]."[140] But in his engagement with these "factual" documents, Raad continued the project he had begun with The Atlas Group to question the understanding of historic narratives told through archives and sources as inherently reflective of reality. Both in fact and in fiction, Raad's message beginning in 1999 overlapped with and inspired the work of Umam D&R from 2004 on, even as it seemed to anticipate and even challenge it.

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[137] "About Us," http://www.fai.org.lb/Template.aspx?id=3.
[138] Karl; Raad Bassil, Walid; Zaatari, Akram, ed. *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography* (Lebanon: Mind the Gap and Arab Image Foundation, 2005).
[139] Ibid.
[140] Raad, *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, 50.

## III: History and Fantasy

As has been addressed in this chapter, Raad openly declares that his work with The Atlas Group is fiction, no matter how much it resembles fact. In doing so, he plays on the tension between the factual and fictional in his projects, much as he did with his collaboration for AIF, to draw out "questions about subjective impressions and personal experience, about how individuals remember and fabricate 'history.'"[141] Though their source materials differ, this is an end to which Umam D&R is also deeply invested. Ultimately through all his "untruths," Raad seeks to speak to reality in Beirut and Lebanon by blurring the line between fact and fiction. His pieces are intentionally realistic in order to lead audiences to question what is real about the past and thus the present. Umam D&R, which emerged after his Atlas Group was already well established, appeared in many ways influenced by him in this regard. Thus, the organization can be seen to offer a space for these questions he engages, although pursued through different means. In their attempt to engage with facts, despite Raad's critique of just such an undertaking, there appears to be a lesson from the artists that wasn't learned.

A key distinction remains, however, in that Umam D&R is ultimately concerned with discerning historic narratives that are explicitly understood as *true*. The Hangar in its capacity as an exhibit space has featured a diverse range of shows, some of which probe the area between fact and fiction.[142] However, the work of Umam D&R addressed in this

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[141] Ibid., 39.

[142] Most recently, in the summer of 2015 The Hangar was one of the hosts of a multi-sited exhibition titled "Space Between Our Fingers," which featured two pieces that juxtaposed "real" experiences of Arab

chapter, and indeed all the organization's in-house projects, rely explicitly on factual source material – most frequently drawn from their own archive, which was founded with the desire to know and share the truth of Lebanon's civil war history. The "Collecting Dahiyeh" exhibition, the *Massaker* documentary, and the "Missing" exhibition all had this in common: the material presented was supported in some capacity by documentary evidence. According to Lokman, this desire to foreground the truth in Umam D&R's work was influenced not only by the incomplete official record of the civil war, but also by the aftermath of the 2005 Hariri assassination and the mass protests that followed it (often referred to as the Cedar Revolution or Beirut Spring): "I took a lot of pictures of banners and posters at that time, they just read "The Truth – *Al-Haqeeqa*" in Arabic. …So there was a kind of truth seeking – call it however you want, call it popular, call it populist – and this truth seeking was much more a drive toward truth telling."[143] Umam D&R sought to take up this call, and truth telling has remained core to their aims as an organization.

Returning to Trouillot, in his book *Silencing the Past*, the Haitian anthropologist articulates a dichotomy between positivist and constructivist approaches to history. In opposition to these two philosophies, he argues that the historian's role is neither "to reveal the past, to discover, or at least approximate, the truth" nor to discern how "the historical narrative bypasses the issue of truth by virtue of its forms." Instead he calls for

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scientists with outer space (one of the famed Lebanese Rocket Society and the other of the only Syrian cosmonaut) and the fantasies surrounding such stories.

[143] Slim, L. 2015.

an engagement with how "some narrative rather than others" become powerful enough to function as "accepted history."[144] Both Umam D&R and Raad take up this project to question the relationships of power that construct history, though with distinctive approaches to the possible veracity of the past.

Trouillot also draws on Bulgarian-French historian and literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between "fiction, fake, and historical writing."[145] Based on Todorov's logic, the stories Raad tells in his work with The Atlas Group could qualify as "fakes" because they are supported only by falsified documentation. In contrast, the work of Lokman, Monika, and others at Umam D&R seeks to inspire and contribute to "historical" writing, largely through the circulation of factually accurate documentation and sources that challenge dominant narratives on the basis of truth. The methods of The Atlas Group and Umam D&R parallel in many ways, but they ultimately diverge on this difference.

Drawing on Todorov's earlier theorization of the fantastic in literature, however, Raad's work could also be described as an uncanny fantasy, one in which the "laws of reality" remain intact and have the potential to provide a rational explanation for a fantastic event: "The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of

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[144] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 5-6.
[145] Ibid., 158.

the events described."[146] In Todorov's view, it is this hesitation on the part of the audience (and often the characters themselves) that marks a work as fantastic. Raad's pieces with The Atlas Group also seek to illicit hesitation from their audience: as this chapter has attempted to show, they blur the line between fact and fiction in ways that are difficult to trace.

The work of Umam D&R through its archive, exhibitions, and events, attempts to construct an engagement with the past that is explicitly factual. While they may challenge certain narratives of history in the constructivist tradition, there is an underlying positivist historicity they submit to, an assumption that the reality of *what happened* can be found out and identified. In this way, they subscribe to Trouillot's conception of Historicity 2 (that which is said to have happened), without losing hope in the possibility of deciphering Historicity 1 (that which happened). Raad seeks to question truth by challenging the conception of reality and the real, but Umam D&R questions truth in hopes of arriving at an answer.

[146] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), 33.

# CONCLUSION: ARCHIVING SUCCESS

In October 2015, the Museum of Modern Art presented "the first American museum survey of one of contemporary art's most critical figures," Walid Raad, which remained on display until the end of January 2016 before traveling to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and then to the Museo Jumex in Mexico City (just across the street from the Museo Soumaya built by Mexican billionaire of Lebanese descent Carlos Slim).[147] The exhibition featured photography, video, sculpture, and performance works from two of the artist's long-term projects: The Atlas Group (1989–2004) and *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World* (2007–ongoing). While the former focuses on contemporary history in Lebanon, the latter engages with broader networks across the region through the recent emergence in the Arab world of new infrastructure for the visual arts. Both, however, explore the distinctions between fact and fiction in the public realm and the subsequent role of narrative and storytelling in producing history.

Since his emergence on the international art scene in the early 1990s, Raad has been featured in over 200 shows worldwide (including previous inclusion in group exhibitions at MoMA) and maintains a post as Associate Professor of Art at The Cooper Union, but the solo showcase at MoMA nevertheless offered him unprecedented exposure. As the literature accompanying the exhibition states, the show constituted "the

[147] Respini, *Walid Raad*, 6.

most comprehensive in any museum to date, introducing the full scope of his work to an American audience for the first time."[148] Beyond this, it marked a new level of critical engagement with his fictional facts and imagined histories. As Raad himself observed, his show overlapped at MoMA with a particularly well-received exhibition of Pablo Picasso's sculptures. Speaking with Andy Battaglia of *The National*, Raad commented on the way audiences would view his pieces compared to those of such avowed masters:

> People wouldn't go up there and say, 'Did this woman really have a nose in her ear?' What kind of 'fact' is that? Was the sky in a Van Gogh really like that? Did the world of Seurat really look pointillist? What prompts somebody to ask that kind of question? … I would love if somebody would bring the same attitude they bring to a Picasso or Seurat to this [gesturing to his work].[149]

But instead of drawing greater notice to the aesthetics of his pieces, critics emphasized the way works such as Raad's could be of "use," with *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter noting that Raad "shows art taking matters into its own hands, temporarily shrinking and vanishing to sustain a radical life of its own, building new power through self-protective retreat."[150] The increased attention Raad's work received through its exhibition at the MoMA ultimately focused on the question central to his work with The Atlas Group: How is history made, received, visualized, and understood?

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[148] Ibid.
[149] Andy Battaglia, "Exhibitions: Lebanese Artist Walid Raad Layers Fantastic Truths at Moma," *The National*, November 26 2015.
[150] Cotter, "Walid Raad's Unreality Show Spins Middle Eastern History as Art."

As the preceding chapters have sought to show, this question is also fundamental to the work of Umam D&R. While noting the marked difference between Raad's imagined archive and the organization's emphasis on facts, Umam D&R's efforts to promote the production of an inclusive Lebanese history through the circulation of substantiated narratives is by no means more straightforward than Raad's work. Instead, the interventions carried out by Lokman, Monika, and their colleagues are determined by a constellation of forces that can be seen through the spaces in which they work – Villa Slim, The Hangar, Dahiyeh, Beirut, and Lebanon. The goal of this thesis in seeking to unpack the relationships between Umam D&R and the settings in which it functions has not been just to determine whether the organization is successful in its attempts to complicate the understanding of conflict and memory in Lebanon. Much as the significance of Raad's art is not measured by where the artist places a subject's nose, Umam D&R's importance as an object of study is not determined solely by the impact its individual projects have. Engaging with themes of place and milieu in analyzing this organization has enabled me to draw broader conclusions about memory, narrative, history, nostalgia, and the power of the archive.

Thus, while success has not been my direct concern in this project, it still plays a crucial role in determining Umam D&R's ability to perpetuate its work and its mission. Additionally, it was a question that preoccupied those I spoke with in the summer of 2015, when Umam D&R's work at The Hangar had long been on hold (though the space was still being used for events hosted by others such as a screening of the web series

Zyara held in March 2016) and the organization was having trouble securing funding due to the security and volatile political situation in Lebanon. When asked about the organization's ability to continue hosting multifaceted productions in the future, in addition to maintaining its archive space, Lokman was not optimistic. He said, "I really don't know. The question is becoming more and more difficult to answer. I don't pretend to have an answer. I ask it to myself all the time and I don't pretend that there is any answer that satisfies me."[151] Limits to Umam D&R's ability to draw people interested in challenging narratives of history (and Hezbollah) to Dahiyeh have forced them in some ways to look beyond the neighborhood.

Rasha suggested that it might be in the best interest of everyone if Umam D&R were to give up on the neighborhood, Villa Slim, and The Hangar entirely. She argued that "UMAM is speaking history and we need to speak present and not only history. Present is *khalas* [done, over] – there will be war for years. So how can a small institution keep on doing good things in this area? One should go and find another place, in Switzerland, in a calm place, and rethink all this, maybe return once a year to check things on the ground."[152] While there appears to be plenty of room (and support) for imaginary history in the world of art, the contradictions of Umam D&R's politics and its place in Dahiyeh have limited the viability of its claims to circulate factual narratives of the past.

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[151] Slim, L. 2015.
[152] al Ameer, R. 2015.

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